



Discerning Questions

Judges 6-7

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I want to say hello to those of you joining us online and those of you in the room. Thank you for being brave and going out in the cold and being here. It always makes me glad when you are here. So thanks for being here.

Jesus, oh wait, we already prayed. Well, Jesus, we pray again that you would lead us as we look at your word, to understand you better, in your name. Amen.

So one of the hardest things about getting a PhD is to come up with a dissertation topic. Because it has to be new, interesting, and right. And you can get two of those three pretty easily, but all three is really hard to do.

For instance, I came across a dissertation about the poet John Milton's use of the semicolon. New and right, maybe, but definitely not interesting.

So then one day, I was rereading *Hamlet*—for how many times at the time, I don't know—and I came to Shakespeare's play and started to ask this question: Why is the ghost in *Hamlet* from purgatory? That's a Catholic belief. *Hamlet* is a Protestant play written in Protestant England.

That one question became the basis for my entire dissertation, which I titled *The Persistence of Memory, Reactionary Politics, Sexual Heresy, and Medieval Nostalgia in England, 1533 to 1667*.

So impressed, amen. Can I have an amen? Preach.

And did you know that you can actually buy people's dissertations? Mine has sold tens of copies. And some of you are like, "I'm surprised it sold that many, Dudley." I got that long, pretentious title from one question, which shows that often the right question is more important than the right statement.

And that is true of discerning God's will as well. When we are faced with times of discernment—should I do this job or that job, move here, move there—that sort of thing, there are some key questions that we can ask to help us discern God's direction for our life.

We see that in an Old Testament story about a guy named Gideon.

Israel was being attacked by a group of people called the Midianites, who, at harvest time, would swoop into Israel, take all their crops, leaving Israel with nothing to eat. And God uses Gideon to defeat the Midianites.

The text starts when the Israelites cried out to the Lord because of Midian. He sent them a prophet who said, "This is what the Lord says: I brought you up out of the land of slavery. I rescued you from the hand of the Egyptians, and I delivered you from all of your oppressors."

This shows the first key question when we're discerning God's will, either individually for our lives or as a church community. The first question is: *What is God already doing?*

The prophet reminds Israel of what God has already been doing: getting them out of slavery in Egypt, turning them into a community whose job it was to extend His radical love and healing all around the world. And what He has been doing is an indicator of what He will do, what He wants to do, which is to deliver them from this new oppressor.

See, God is always doing something, and discernment is figuring out what God is doing and joining Him.

I sometimes get asked how a Presbyterian church in Bellevue ended up with a lot of Africans in our church. And it's a long story that began 22 years ago when I was still in my church in California. That church brought a man named Antoine Ruta Yasseri from Rwanda to do a seminar, and I got to know him there.

When I got here, there had been a group of people praying and fasting, as we're doing right now as a church, asking God, "Where in the world would you like us to get involved?" They were centering in on Rwanda and said, "There's a man we want you to meet named Antoine Rutayasiri."

And I said, "Oh, I already know him from my former church," which seemed like confirmation that we should be involved in Rwanda. A few years later, we built a center to give job skills to under-resourced kids, which connected us to people doing work with kids in Rwanda. One of them was a young man named Alexis, who later had to come here as a refugee, came to our church, and began *New Hope Revival*.

And that's how a Presbyterian church in Bellevue ends up with a lot of Africans in our church. God started working on that 22 years ago when I was in California. But actually, we've been in refugee ministry even way before that, way back in the '70s. People in this

church invited Cambodian refugees to come and live in their homes with them for a season.

What God has been doing is a good indicator of what He wants to do.

The story goes on and introduces Gideon, who is threshing wheat in a wine press, which is meant to be comic, because the way you thresh wheat is you throw it in the air, and the wind blows away the chaff, and the wheat falls to the ground. But a wine press is in a hole in the ground.

Gideon is doing it in a wine press because he's scared of the Midianites and doesn't want to be seen by them. The text says, "The angel of the Lord appeared to Gideon, and he said, 'The Lord is with you, mighty warrior.'"

"Pardon me, my Lord." Which seems like a very tame response to an angel, don't you think? "Pardon me?" Basically, "Who you callin' a mighty warrior?" Like, no mighty warriors here, just a scared guy in a wine press.

And then the angel tells him to go and defeat the Midianites. So it's a pretty clear call, because it's an angel, but it's a really big ask, right? Go defeat the Midianites.

A lot of times in times of discernment, when we're trying to figure something out, we'll say, "Oh, I just wish God would make it clear what He wants me to do." Are you sure? Are you sure you want that? Because my experience is that the clearer He makes the call, the harder that thing is going to be. We're going to need the clarity of the call to get through those hard times.

So then Gideon says, "But how can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family." So he's insecure. "I'm not wealthy enough, I'm not strong enough, I'm not popular enough."

And we do the same thing. When we face something God is asking us to do, we say, "I can't do that. I'm not this enough, I'm too much of that, I'm not old enough, young enough," all kinds of things. This brings me to the second key question for discerning God's will: *What does God want to do in me?*

See, Gideon doesn't believe in himself, and as we're going to see, he doesn't trust God very much either. But through a long process that takes two whole chapters with various twists and turns—and ends with Gideon defeating the Midianites—Gideon gains confidence because he sees that God is mighty to save, which makes him more courageous.

As you've heard me say many times, God doesn't use us to get projects done, He uses projects to get us done. And defeating the Midianites was how God got Gideon done, making him more courageous, more faith-filled, and ultimately changing him.

Whatever God calls us to do, individually or collectively as a church, will be part of His plan to get us done, to make us who He created us to be.

So then Gideon says, "Give me a sign that it's really you talking to me," which is the next question. When we think we've heard God say something, *How can I be sure?* How can I be sure that was really God and not just me?

That's Gideon's question.

So Gideon comes up with a test. He goes away, makes a dinner, and brings it back. The angel touches it with his staff, and the whole meal explodes into flame. So, kind of clear that you're talking to God, right?

You'd think that would do it, but no. Gideon wasn't quite satisfied with the exploding meal. So he says to the angel, "If you will save Israel by my hand, 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." And that's what happened.

So now we're good, right? The angel made the pot roast explode, the fleece was wet, and the ground was dry. We're good. Not right.

No, we're not good yet. No, no, no. Then Gideon said to God, "Don't be angry with me. Allow me one more test with the fleece, but this time make the fleece dry and let the ground be covered with dew." That night, God did so.

Three different tests designed to make sure that it was God that he was hearing from.

Now, if you've been around churches a lot, you may have heard people use a phrase, "In times of discernment, I'm trying to figure out what God wants me to do, this thing or that thing, so I'm gonna lay out a fleece." You sometimes hear Christians say that.

"I'm gonna lay out a fleece," and then it's some sign that they ask for. You know, "God, I'm gonna drive around Top Pot donuts five times, and if a parking space opens up, I know it's your will that I eat a dozen donuts."

Now you're all hungry, right? Dang, God is calling me to go get a donut right now. Now, that's a fleece. That's laying out a fleece.

Okay, now, some people, some commentators, say Gideon is being faithless here. He's wrong because this is more like magic thinking than actual discernment. But others point out that Gideon says to God the third time, "Don't be mad," and God isn't mad and even grants the request. So maybe what Gideon did was okay.

I come down firmly and confidently in the "I'm not sure" camp. There are better ways to confirm if what we think we're hearing from God is actually from God. There are better ways to do it than this.

But God is also, in this story, patient with Gideon. He's patient with us in our bad theology, and He works with us, wherever we're at.

But the good thing that Gideon does here is he seeks confirmation. Because we all know stories of people who are just sure they heard God tell them to do something, and it wasn't God. It was, you know, they went and did something stupid because they said, "God told me to," and it wasn't God. They heard what they wanted to hear.

We need to confirm what we think God said. The two best ways to confirm that it was God are the Bible and community. Does it line up with what Scripture says? Because if it doesn't, you did not hear from God.

And then second is community. Trusted Christian friends where we say, "Hey, this is what I think I heard. How does that sound to you? Does that feel like God to you?"

So then, after the fleece thing, Gideon gathers a big army to go fight the Midianites. And then God says, "You have too many men. I can't deliver Midian into their hands, or Israel will boast, 'My own strength has saved me.'"

"Now, announce to the army, anyone who trembles with fear may turn back and leave." So 22,000 men left. I think this one is super funny, right? "If you're afraid, you can go home." "Okay, bye!" "Run away, run away."

And then God says, "You still have... oops, lost my place."

Then God says, "You still have too many. Take them down to the water, separate those who lap the water with their tongues like a dog from those who kneel down to drink." Three hundred of them drank from cupped hands, lapping like dogs. All the rest got down on their knees to drink.

And the Lord said, "With the three hundred that lapped, I will give the Midianites into your hands. Let all the others go."

Commentaries on this passage always try to figure out: Why did God choose the three hundred dog lappers? Maybe because they drank from their cupped hands, or they were more alert, or whatever, right? It's nonsense. It's random.

Because sometimes God asks us to do things that don't make sense to us at first, right? But the point is, God wants to make it really clear that it's His power delivering them, because then the Israelites will be less scared the next time they face a challenge. They will have seen God's power to save them.

Which brings me to the last question: *Can it only be done through God's power?*

Because if we can do it in our own strength, then our vision is too small. God's calling us to something bigger.

Because it's when we do things that we can't do in our own strength that not only we, but people around us, see that God is real and that He is powerful.

But sometimes we shrink down our vision to what we can accomplish in our own strength, because we are afraid to fail.

But here's the thing: I would rather fail for the right reasons than succeed for the wrong ones. I would rather fail for the right reasons than succeed for the wrong ones.

I may fail trying to do something that God has called me to do, but at least I failed trying to do the right thing, not the small thing, or the safe thing, or the wrong thing.

So then Gideon takes his 300 dog lappers, and they go and defeat the Midianites, and it's a super exciting story that I don't have time to finish, so you can go home and read it on your own.

But four questions to discern God's will:

1. What is God already doing?
2. What has He been doing?
3. What does God want to develop in me or in us?
4. How can I be sure?
5. Can it only be done through God's power?

And that's why we're doing these 25 days of prayer and fasting as a church, as a training exercise to help us grow in our ability to hear from God. And if you haven't started, that's okay. There's still a week left. You can still do it.

You can fast from food just until dinner one day a week, until the 25th, or do that every day, or some other way that works for you. The point is not to follow rules, but just to do this in some way to grow in our ability to hear from God.

And if you shouldn't fast from food, fast from something else like shopping or social media or something like that. And then pray more than you normally do.

And as you pray, ask God two questions: *What do you want to say to me personally?*

Maybe it's about a decision you have to make, a relationship, or a problem you're struggling with.

And then, second, as we've talked about the last few weeks, how do you want to use our capacity as a community here at Belle Presse for your kingdom?

This will culminate in an all-ages morning of discernment this Saturday, where you're all invited, including our kids, to come in person and just report what you heard God say as you prayed and fasted.

And by "heard," I don't mean an audible voice. It might just be one word that you hear. It might be a picture that pops into your head. It might be a memory. Who knows what it is?

Even if you heard something that doesn't make sense—like the story I told a couple of weeks ago about a friend of mine who heard God say, "Go buy a sword," which made no sense until 18 months later—bring it anyway, because it may be super important.

And if you don't hear anything, come anyway, because you may hear something that day, or God may speak through you to someone that day.

That day, Saturday, we're not going to be making decisions. This discernment process is a long one, and this is the listening phase of that process. Our elders will pray and fast over everything that we hear to help us make decisions about where God is leading us as a church. There will be follow-ups and further conversations in the months ahead. When you register, we'll send you more information.

But please come, because this is the chance for us to practice some corporate discernment. And every voice matters—including our kids.

Let me give you an example of how this works in real life from one of our elders, Brandon McNerney, who grew up in this church. I want you to listen to the various twists and turns his journey of discernment has taken him.

Brandon's Story:

"Around six years ago, shortly after I started my career in civil engineering, I got a thought that I knew was from God calling me to join staff with an engineering missions organization called EMI in the year 2026. EMI is an organization that supports other Christian ministries in the developing world by designing buildings like schools, hospitals, and orphanages. Although it scared me, it was a clear enough call that I chose to listen and begin moving toward that goal.

Little did I know, the real discernment process had not yet begun. Over the next few years, I did several projects with EMI's Cambodia office, making many friends as God grew my heart for that country, and I immersed myself in research on what it would look like to live and serve there. But then I found out that it wasn't guaranteed that EMI would send me to Cambodia, which brought about the question: *What if God called me to a different country? Would I still go?*

And how would I know if it was really God calling me to that place versus EMI just trying to fill a quota? I wrestled with those questions for the next two years. Through various conversations, time in scripture, and prayer, I slowly began to hold my desire to go to Cambodia more openly.

One key moment was at a conference where a missionary talked about how he always wanted to serve in Cambodia, but God derailed his plans, and he ended up in Africa for 30 years, where he did some amazing things. He told us, "Don't let your desires get in the way of God's plan for your life." I turned to my friend next to me and said, "I don't think I'm going to Cambodia."

Well, last spring, the time finally came to apply for staff with EMI. Before submitting the application, I fasted and prayed, asking God to be clear with me on where to send me and centering myself in trust so I wouldn't manipulate the application to leave them no choice but to send me to Cambodia—even though that did still seem like the most rational place for me to go.

Finally, last fall, I received the news that EMI really wanted me to go to Senegal in West Africa. My heart sank. Turns out, I was really hoping God would reward my openness with what I wanted all along. I guess I wasn't as open as I thought. I began processing all the ways it didn't make sense to go somewhere other than Cambodia. I mean, I already knew some of the language. I had community there. I had a heart for Cambodia, and I really had no heart for Senegal.

But then, after prayer, I started to feel some peace. The next morning, a folk song came on shuffle that talks about the love of God. I'd heard it since I was a kid, but never had listened to the words of the middle stanza: *For the love of it all, I would go anywhere, to the ends of the earth, oh, what is it worth if love could be there? Walking the thin line between fear and the call, one learns to bend and finally depend on the love of it all.*

Should have been the end of my discernment, right? Nope. In the days following, as I learned about the office in Senegal, I had several concerns about whether I'd really be a good fit there. Then I met with our missions pastor, Rich Leatherberry, and he told me that at first he felt I should push back on EMI and follow my heart to go to Cambodia.

But when he prayed about it, he just heard one word: *surrender*. Then I talked with others who'd worked at the Senegal office and found more things that didn't seem like a perfect fit. This went on for two weeks, back and forth between doubt and peace. Eventually, I gave in.

It didn't make sense to me, but whenever I took time to declutter my mind and just be in Jesus' presence, I felt a strong sense of peace. So I stepped out in faith and visited Senegal last November. On that trip, God confirmed my calling. For instance, I saw how I, as a young single adult staff, could serve the other staff of mostly young families as an uncle, babysitter, and how they could serve me as a surrogate family while I was away.

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One of the things I didn't like was that the office was right next to a beach, which seemed to me to be more about the staff being comfortable. But then I learned a lot of the staff came from the Midwest and didn't actually have much affinity for the water. I love the water. It's where I go to spend time with God. And one day, as I was taking a walk along that beach, I sensed God telling me, *I've prepared this for you.*

It still may not make complete sense, but this beach is just a small glimpse of some of the ways I've designed this to work for you. He also showed me how my time investing in Cambodia was not wasted. It was a crucial step in growing my heart to serve as an engineering missionary. He assured me that he wants me to thrive and that he really does know best. I won't be leaving until the end of this year, and I still don't fully know why God wants me in Senegal. But I do know that when the going gets tough, the memories of these years of discernment will bring me more peace than I could ever have gotten by insisting on my own way."

Thank you, Brandon.

That's how discernment works in real life. It's not always a straight path, but God always gets us there. And you hear in that story how God guides us, and those four questions I talked about:

- What was God doing for six years, giving Brandon both engineering experience and a desire to use that for the kingdom?
- What was God doing in Brandon? Teaching him to surrender and trust God.
- How could he be sure? All kinds of confirmations—everything from songs to speakers at a conference, to Pastor Leatherberry helping him discern.
- And can he only do this in God's strength? Do you think?

God has guided Brandon to something that even still doesn't make complete sense to him, but for sure, it's going to be an adventure. I can't wait for the stories Brandon is going to tell about how big our God is.

And what God is doing for Brandon, He wants to do for all of us. God is with you. God will guide you. God will surprise you, He will equip you, He will change you, and He will use you and me to make it on earth as it is in heaven. And I can't wait to hear how God has spoken to all of you in these last few weeks, and I can't wait for the stories we're going to get to tell of all the ways God uses us together as a community for His kingdom.

Jesus, thank you so much that we're not alone. You guide, You call, You steer. So Lord, as we pray, as we fast, help us to hear Your voice. Where You are leading us—individually, with all the decisions we have in our lives, as well as corporately as a church. Jesus, thank you. You are good to us all the time. So lead on, and we'll follow. In Your name, Jesus. Amen.

Discussion Questions:

Read this week's scripture(s) & answer the below questions with your friends, family, or All In small group.

Opening Question: Looking back to last week's sermon and scripture... How did you live differently or practice what we talked about in your life this week? What did you do and how did it go?

Scripture Reflection Questions: Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following:

- What do we learn about God (e.g., traits, personality, what matters, priorities) in this passage?
- What do we learn about people, and ourselves in particular, this week?

Sermon Reflection Questions: Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:

- What do you make of Gideon's repeated requests for a sign? How does God respond? Why do you think God responds the way he does?
- Why does God reduce the size of Gideon's army in chapter 7? How does this build Gideon's faith?
- How has God guided you in the past? What signs has he given you?

Closing Question and Application: Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you to apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week? Who might you share this with?

Closing group prayer: Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.