

**Lessons Learned on the Journey**  
**God's Abiding Presence**  
**The Pillar of Cloud and Fire**  
**Exodus 13: 17-22; Numbers 9:15-23**

**Introduction**

We have been studying Israel's journey from Egypt to the Promised Land. Today we'll look at Exodus chapter 13 and learn about God's abiding presence pictured for us in the pillar of cloud and fire. Nehemiah 9:12 says, "Moreover You led them by day with a cloudy pillar and by night with a pillar of fire; to give them light on the road which they should travel."

We have learned so far in our studies that Israel's deliverance from the bondage of Egypt represents our own deliverance from the bondage of sin. Israel's deliverance from the destroying angel was accomplished by applying the blood of the Passover lamb to the doorposts of their houses. Their deliverance pictures the salvation we receive by applying the blood of Jesus Christ to the doorposts of our hearts. How many of you know it was John the Baptist who declared that Jesus was the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.

Last week we learned that the Feast of Unleavened Bread began the first night of the Passover. We also learned that the Bible pictures leaven as sin. The Apostle Paul says, "Therefore, let us keep the feast, not with the old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth." So, the Feast of Unleavened Bread symbolizes a life without sin lived in sincerity and truth. Is that possible? Only as we yield our lives each day to the indwelling presence of God's Holy Spirit.

The Christian life is a call to a life of holiness. It is a life that acknowledges and embraces the sacrifice of Christ as God's Passover Lamb. However you cannot live the Christian life unless you let Christ live his life through you. The Christian life begins when we recognize that we are sinners and decide to accept Christ's sacrifice on the Cross as sufficient to forgive us of our sins. It is then that we truly begin to keep the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

The Feast of Unleavened Bread is a picture of how we are to live the Christian life. But not only are we to get rid of the leaven in our lives, we are also to do no servile work. Some people believe we are saved by grace but then think we must live the rest of our lives trying to please God by doing good works. But nowhere in scripture is that taught. We are saved by grace through faith. And then we continue to live our Christian lives by grace through faith. It is true that good works are a product of Christian living, but they are certainly not the standard and measure of it. The work that pleases God is the work of surrendering our will to the will of God, by obeying God's Word and following the Holy Spirit's leading. Our work as Christians is to allow God to work in and through us. God's work in us is what causes us to want to live for Him and do the things that are pleasing to him.

That is what makes the Christian life a life of freedom. It is a life of grace. It is a life of enjoying the things that God does through us.

As Israel begins their journey from Egypt to the Promised Land God's miraculous guidance will become evident to them through the sign of the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night.

## **I. God's Abiding Presence Guides Us.**

When Israel needed guidance and direction on their journey to the Promised Land, God provided them with a guide. Who was Israel's guide? God was! He appeared to them as the Pillar of Cloud and Fire.

We read about it in Exodus 13:17, "Then it came to pass, when Pharaoh had let the people go, that God did not lead them *by* way of the land of the Philistines, although that *was* near; for God said, "Lest perhaps the people change their minds when they see war, and return to Egypt." So God led the people around *by* way of the wilderness of the Red Sea. And the children of Israel went up in orderly ranks out of the land of Egypt." (Exo 13:17-18)

This text suggests that the cloud appeared when the Israelites left Succoth, which was the first camp Israel made after departing Rameses on 15 Abib (Nisan), about 1445 BC. Smith's Bible Dictionary says that Succoth, which means "booths", was reached at the close of the first day's march and that the distance traveled was about 24 kilometers or fifteen miles.

God chose not to take the most direct route to the Promised Land because he didn't want the people to have to deal with the fear of facing a war with the Philistines and the panic that might make them want to return to Egypt. Israel was simply a large people group that had just been freed from 400 years of bondage to the Egyptians. They were very well acquainted with slavery and knew what happened to people who were conquered in warfare. So the Lord wisely takes them to the Promised Land a different way. Sadly, even when they got to the Promised Land they were still unwilling to take on the challenge of conquering the land and still wanted to turn around and go back to Egypt. Had it not been for Joshua and Caleb, they all would probably have tried to go back to Egypt.

Verse 19, "And Moses took the bones of Joseph with him, for he had placed the children of Israel under solemn oath, saying, "God will surely visit you, and you shall carry up my bones from here with you." So they took their journey from Succoth and camped in Etham at the edge of the wilderness. And the LORD went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so as to go by day and night. He did not take away the pillar of cloud by day or the pillar of fire by night *from* before the people. (Exo 13:19-22)

The children of Israel needed assurance that God was right there with them on their journey to the Promised Land. So, God gave them the pillar of cloud by day and

the pillar of fire by night. It was the symbol of God's abiding presence and the promise of his divine guidance.

One of the first lessons we learn from this passage is that the shortest way is not always the surest way. Sometimes God has us take a detour for our own learning and instruction. It seems God's goal was to give Israel time to learn how awesome their God really was.

It was also an opportunity for them to learn some things about themselves. We all need to learn the difference between our natural responses vs a proper faith response.

## **II. God's Abiding Presence Protects Us.**

The next encounter with this pillar of cloud is in Exodus 14:19-20, when God instructs Moses to raise his staff and stretch out his hand over the sea and divide the waters of the Red Sea for the Israelites to escape Pharaoh and his army as they pursued the Israelites. The Egyptians had overtaken the Israelites as they camped by the sea near Pi Hahiroth, opposite Baal Zephon according to Exodus 14:16, 9.

Exodus 14:19, "And the Angel of God, who went before the camp of Israel, moved and went behind them; and the pillar of cloud went from before them and stood behind them. So it came between the camp of the Egyptians and the camp of Israel. Thus it was a cloud and darkness *to the one*, and it gave light by night *to the other*, so that the one did not come near the other all *that night*." (Exo 14:19-20)

Then in verse 24 it says, "Now it came to pass, in the morning watch, that the LORD looked down upon the army of the Egyptians through the pillar of fire and cloud, and He troubled the army of the Egyptians. And He took off their chariot wheels, so that they drove them with difficulty; and the Egyptians said, "Let us flee from the face of Israel, for the LORD fights for them against the Egyptians." (Exo 14:24-25)

During the last watch or what was often called the "fourth watch of the night", sometime between the hours of 3 a.m. and 6 a.m. the LORD looked down from the pillar of fire and cloud at the Egyptian army and threw it into confusion. Israel had crossed the Red Sea during the night, and then between the hours of 3-6 am which would be classified as the 4th watch of the night, the Egyptians began to pursue after Israel. Moses then stretched forth his hand over the waters and Pharaoh and his armies were drowned in the sea. The pillars of cloud and fire gave the Israelites a feeling of security—that God was watching over them.

God accompanied Israel on their journey by either going ahead of them or placing himself in the rear of their group, protecting them against their enemies and against death itself (Exodus 14:19-20). As long as they trusted in the Lord, God protected them. God had said to Abraham in Genesis 15:1, "Do not be afraid, Abram. I *am* your shield and your exceedingly great reward." In Isaiah 52 the prophet told Israel, "For the Lord will go before you; and the God of Israel will be

your rear guard." Isaiah 52:12. And in 58:8, "The glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard." Isaiah 58:8.

According to the Apostle Paul, as the people of God, we have the protection of the "Armour of God" (Ephesians 6:10-18).

This is the passage our theme for 2018, "Strong in the Lord". In Ephesians 6:10 Paul writes, "Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might. 11 Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. 12 For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places. 13 Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. 14 Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth, and having on the breastplate of righteousness; 15 And your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace; 16 Above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked. 17 And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God: 18 Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints."

As long as Israel put their trust in God, the Lord was their defense. Whenever they turned away from God and put their trust in other things, God no longer protected them. The same is true for us today. Any person, family, or nation that puts their faith in God will live under His divine protection. But if we turn away from trusting in God and put our trust in the things of this world; we will no longer enjoy God's protection.

### **III. God's Abiding Presence Covers Us**

We also learn from this lesson that when you are committed to following the Lord, God's got you covered! In Isaiah 4:5-6 the prophet told Israel that when they give up their sinful lives and allow God to become their Master and Lord that, "the LORD will create above every dwelling place of Mount Zion, and above her assemblies, a cloud and smoke by day and the shining of a flaming fire by night. For over all the glory there will be a covering. <sup>6</sup> And there will be a tabernacle for shade in the daytime from the heat, for a place of refuge, and for a shelter from storm and rain."

The cloud served as a shelter and "canopy" that provided both "shade by day from the heat" and heat by night from the cold and as "a refuge and a shelter from the storm and rain." There are some great implications here. God provided a large cloud that sheltered over two million Israelites plus their flocks and herds.

Usually clouds bring rain, not shelter from rain. Clouds are porous and really incapable of keeping out rain. But this miraculous pillar of cloud was unique in its ability to prevent the saturation of a down pour of desert rain. The lesson for us as

Christians today is that: "God's wisdom will not lead us where his grace cannot keep us." Faith can firmly trust in God, come what may!

Read Exodus 13 verse 21 and 22. "And the LORD went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so as to go by day and night. He did not take away the pillar of cloud by day or the pillar of fire by night *from* before the people. (Exo 13:21-22)

The pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire were really the same pillar. In the daytime, the pillar was a cloud to shield them from the hot desert sun. But in the evening the pillar was a column of fire to warm them from the cool desert nights. The pillar represented the abiding presence of God. It guided Israel all the way to the Promised Land.

In Exodus Chapter 40 When it was time for the long awaited moment when God's glory moved from being outside the camp at the "tent of meeting" into the newly built and consecrated Tabernacle verse 24 says, "Then the cloud covered the tabernacle of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. And Moses was not able to enter the tabernacle of meeting, because the cloud rested above it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. Whenever the cloud was taken up from above the tabernacle, the children of Israel would go onward in all their journeys. But if the cloud was not taken up, then they did not journey till the day that it was taken up. For the cloud of the LORD *was* above the tabernacle by day, and fire was over it by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel, throughout all their journeys." (Exo 40:34-38)

The promise of God's abiding presence is always with us. In the New Testament Jesus tells his disciples, "Lo I am with you always even to the end of the age." The Apostle John writes in 1 John 2:27, "But the anointing which you have received from Him abides in you, and you do not need that anyone teach you; but as the same anointing teaches you concerning all things, and is true, and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, you will<sup>[a]</sup> abide in Him."

So what does Jesus use as our pillar of cloud and fire? The Holy Spirit. In John Chapter 14 Jesus tells the disciples, "And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever— the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you. (Joh 14:16-17)

Every believer has the Holy Spirit indwelling them and reigns over the tabernacle of our heart. That is how the presence of Christ is made real in our lives. Jesus is with us in the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. The usual resting place of the cloud was over the Most Holy Place in Israel's tabernacle. The tabernacle of the New Testament is our heart. God's abiding presence now dwells within us in the power of the Holy Spirit.

As believers we are to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit.

## Conclusion

There are several lessons Israel learned by following the pillar of cloud and fire. The first is, we must learn to move when God tells us to move. Numbers 9:15 says, Now on the day that the tabernacle was raised up, the cloud covered the tabernacle, the tent of the Testimony; from evening until morning it was above the tabernacle like the appearance of fire. So it was always: the cloud covered it *by day*, and the appearance of fire by night. Whenever the cloud was taken up from above the tabernacle, after that the children of Israel would journey; and in the place where the cloud settled, there the children of Israel would pitch their tents. At the command of the LORD the children of Israel would journey, and at the command of the LORD they would camp; as long as the cloud stayed above the tabernacle they remained encamped. (Num 9:15-18)

Simple instructions: They moved when the cloud moved. What's the significance of that? The direction of their lives was determined by God. It was divine direction. They moved "at the commandment of the Lord." They moved when the cloud moved. They didn't sit around and wonder, "Now, when do you think we ought to move?" If the cloud moved, they moved. It was that simple, they just waited until they had clear direction from God. That's an important principle! And it's a pretty easy principle to follow.

Lesson number two is, stay when God tells you to stay. They tarried when the cloud tarried. If the cloud did not move, they did not move. Our world today is obsessed with motion. If you aren't multi-tasking at least 25 things at a time you're going to miss something. People today just don't know how to be still. Anxiety and depression medication are at an all-time high these days. We just don't know how to respond to God's call of "Be still and know that I am God." Israel only moved when the cloud moved and they stayed where they were when the cloud stayed.

The third lesson is even deeper. They tarried as long as the cloud tarried. Their advice to us today would be, "Don't move unless God tells you to move. In verse 22 it says, "Whether it was two days, a month, or a year that the cloud remained above the tabernacle, the children of Israel would remain encamped and not journey; but when it was taken up, they would journey. At the command of the LORD they remained encamped, and at the command of the LORD they journeyed; they kept the charge of the LORD, at the command of the LORD by the hand of Moses." (Num 9:22-23)

Followers need guidance. They can't follow without it! We are the modern day followers of God. And as followers we need divine guidance. Did you notice that the children of Israel did not have a plan or even a roadmap? The only plan they had was, "Tomorrow, we'll do what God tells us to do!" They lived by the one day plan method. Other than that they had no plans. They knew they were going to the Promised Land, but they didn't even have responsibility of checking out which was the best route to take from where they were to get there.

Their plan was to follow God's plan. And that should be our plan too. There aren't really any plans of our own that will bring the promise of God upon us. Our responsibility is simply to follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit and receive the promise of the Father. Proverbs 3:5-6 says, Trust in the LORD with all your heart, And lean not on your own understanding; In all your ways acknowledge Him, And He shall direct your paths. Do not be wise in your own eyes; Fear the LORD and depart from evil. It will be health to your flesh, And strength to your bones. Honor the LORD with your possessions, And with the firstfruits of all your increase; So your barns will be filled with plenty, And your vats will overflow with new wine. (Pro 3:5-10)

When we start making plans of our own, we begin to rely upon our human reasoning instead of divine principles. And we start reading things into God's divine plan. It is so much simpler just to wait upon the Lord. When Israel grew impatient, they came up with plans of their own. And they were always disastrous.

The cloud gave them light. It gave them shelter. And it provided them with divine guidance. In Romans chapter 8:14 we are told if we are truly the children of God, we are led by the Holy Spirit. Paul says, "As many as are led by the Holy Spirit, they are the children of God." But to be led of the Spirit means you have chosen to follow the Spirit because the Holy Spirit's ministry is a ministry of leadership. He is the one who provides us with divine guidance. The question is not, "Is the Holy Spirit leading," but "Are you following the Holy Spirit's guidance?" In Galatians 5:16 Paul writes, "This I say then, Walk by the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh." In verse 25, he says, "If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit."

The Holy Spirit resides over the tabernacle of our heart. He is here 24/7. He is here to guide us into all truth. Do you allow God's abiding presence to guide you through your day? Or do you dismiss that inner voice of the Spirit and just go your own way?