

## Israel And The Cloud

(A study of divine authority – Numbers 9:15-23)

### INTRODUCTION:

1. When God freed the Israelites from their bondage in Egypt, the goal was to bring them to Canaan, the Promised Land that flowed with milk and honey (Ex. 3:7-8).
2. To get them there, however, they had to trust in God's power, providing hand, and guidance to get them there.
  - A. To help Israel do this, God led them from the beginning with a pillar of cloud by day and pillar of fire by night (Ex. 13:20-21).
  - B. For our lesson today I want to turn our attention to God's use of this cloud/fire after the construction of the temple at Mt. Sinai (Num. 9:15-16 – "Now on the day that the tabernacle was erected **the cloud covered the tabernacle**, the tent of the testimony, and in the **evening** it was like the **appearance of fire over the tabernacle**, until morning. <sup>16</sup> So it was **continuously**; the cloud would cover it by day, and the appearance of fire by night.").
  - i. Though this sight was not new for Israel, if we finished our building and a *cloud* formed and remained over it every day and a *fire* at night, I would be significantly affected.
  - ii. I am sure Israel was too, seeing they understood this meant God was indicating He would continue to be with them and lead them day and night to the Promised Land.
- 3. I want us to study this text today because of what it reveals about divine authority and its intended effect on Israel so that we might better appreciate God's guidance revealed for us in the Scriptures and how it must affect our lives and service in Christ.

### BODY:

- **I. Israel's journey and the cloud**
  - A. Israel's journey was directly connected to God's cloud.
    - 1. They moved when the cloud moved and stopped where the cloud stopped (9:17 – "Whenever the **cloud was lifted** from over the tent, afterward the sons of Israel would then **set out**; and **in the place** where the **cloud settled down, there** the sons of Israel would **camp**.").
    - a. Our son Matthew has a dog that wherever Matthew goes, he goes, and wherever he stops that is where Milo stops. He is like his shadow.
    - b. That is what is described of Israel's movements here in relation to the cloud.
  - 2. This was not by chance, but by God's will (9:18a – "At the **command** of the LORD the sons of Israel would **set out**, and at the **command** of the LORD they would **camp**").
  - a. We get our first glimpse of God's authority over Israel's journey!
  - b. It was not Israel's role to choose when they moved or where they camped. Their role was to trust God's authority and obey, just as Abraham did when travelling to Canaan (Heb. 11:8 – "**By faith** Abraham, when he was called, **obeyed** by going out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was going.").
- B. Our journey as Christians is directly connected to God's word.
  - 1. Like the cloud, the word is the expression of God's authority for us today (1 Cor. 14:37 – "If anyone thinks he is a prophet or spiritual, let him recognize that **the things which I write to you are the Lord's commandment**. <sup>38</sup> But if anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized.").
  - 2. Like the cloud, the written word directs our way today.
    - a. 1 Tim. 3:14-15 – "I am writing these things to you, hoping to come to you before long; <sup>15</sup> but in case I am delayed, **I write** so that you will **know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God**, which is **the church** of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth."
    - b. 2 Tim. 3:16-17 – "All Scripture *is* given by inspiration of God, and *is* profitable for **doctrine**, for **reproof**, for **correction**, for **instruction in righteousness**, that the man of God may be **complete, thoroughly equipped** for every good work."

- 3. So, like Israel, it is not our role to determine when and where we go or stop on our journey to heaven, but to trust Christ's authoritative word and obey (Heb. 5:8-9 – "Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered.<sup>9</sup> And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to **all who obey him**" – ESV).

## • II. If the cloud stayed, Israel stayed

- A. This was done according to **the Lord's charge** (9:18b-20 – "...as long as the cloud settled over the tabernacle, they remained camped.<sup>19</sup> Even when the cloud lingered over the tabernacle for **many days**, the sons of Israel would **keep the LORD's charge** and **not set out**.<sup>20</sup> If sometimes the cloud remained a few days over the tabernacle, according to the command of the LORD they remained camped. Then according to the command of the LORD they set out.").
- 1. So, it did not matter how long the cloud remained over the tabernacle, as long as it did so Israel remained camped that they might **keep the Lord's charge!**
  - a. Again, we see **God's authority** in this narrative.
  - b. Moses is telling us that Israel was not in charge here! When and how they were going to get to the Promised Land was God's decision!
- 2. It did not matter how difficult it might be.
  - a. I say this because what this demanded of Israel was not always easy.
  - b. Camping for a week or two in a nice camper is one thing, but camping indefinitely in a floorless tent in the wilderness is another. **That is hard living!**
  - c. Every day they camped was another day of hardship added to the time it took to get to the Promised Land.
- B. So, let's say for illustration's sake that some of these Jews became frustrated with the pace, believing Israel should be moving more quickly to the Land. **All they want is more progress!**
  - 1. As they talk among their fellow Jews, they remind them that the cloud's lingering means:
    - a. They were needlessly **missing out** on days that could have been spent in the Land.
    - b. The journey is becoming **monotonous**, with the tabernacle sitting in the same place, and people doing the same daily chores, following the same spiritual routine, etc.!
    - c. People are getting **restless**, and the young people are **bored**, and people are in danger of **becoming disconnected**.
  - 2. So, with the **welfare of their brethren in mind**, a group decides to move on toward the Promised Land with the cloud at their backs.
    - a. And you know, all who left were happy and travelling with the hope because they are not progressing toward the Land of milk and honey.
    - b. The new scenery was beautiful, streams of water seemed to abound, and the young people they feared losing back at the cloud were enjoying the journey and engaged again.
    - c. So, with each step they took, and the blessings they observed, they were more and more **convinced that they had made the right decision**.
  - 3. As reasonable and great as it all may sound, their desire for progress caused them to commit three fatal errors.
    - a. First, their movement ahead meant the **cloud**, or **God's will**, was left behind!
    - b. Second, no matter how sincere they may be in their desire to get there, the Promised Land could **only be reached on God's timetable**. For, remember, Israel was to stay and leave **by God's command!** (Num. 9:20)
    - c. Third, in leaving behind the cloud, **they forsook God's compassionate guidance** needed to get them to the Promised Land (Neh. 9:19 – "You, in Your great compassion, **did not forsake them** in the wilderness; the **pillar of cloud did not leave them** by day, to **guide them on their way**, nor the pillar of fire by night, to light for them **the way in which they were to go**.").
  - 4. So, by forsaking God's will and guidance found in the cloud they did not know the way that they should go, and **they perished**.
- C. The Christian journey requires **staying where the Lord says to stay**.

- 1. God only stays with those who stay in Christ's teaching (2 John 9 – "Anyone who **goes too far and does not abide [stay] in the teaching of Christ**, does not have God; the one who abides in the teaching, he has both the Father and the Son.").
- 2. God's people are limited to what is revealed in the word.
  - a. It was true of Israel (Deut. 29:29 – "The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the **things that are revealed belong to us** and to our children forever, **that we may do all the words of this law.**").
  - b. It is true of Christians today (1 Cor. 4:6 – "I have applied all these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, brothers, that you may learn by us **not to go beyond what is written**, that none of you may be puffed up in favor of one against another.").
- 3. People will defend their **additions**, their going on past what the word reveals, as **helping God cause to move forward**:
  - a. The motivation behind changing the church's divine organization (i.e., denominational conventions/synods and brethren's **sponsoring church** where elder's limited authority is rejection by putting them over multi-church projects) has always been that it **helps** the Lord's cause move forward in evangelism, benevolence, etc.
  - b. The motivation for adding social and recreational activities to the work of the local church is that it **helps** draw people and/or keeps the young people interested and engaged.
  - c. But remember, if it is not revealed within the written words of Christ, it is **not of God**, and is **disobedience**, and will cause one **to perish!**
- **III. Israel moved whenever the cloud moved.**
  - A. Israel moved even if their stay was very short (Num. 9:20-21 – "If sometimes the cloud **remained a few days** over the tabernacle, according to the command of the LORD they remained camped. Then according to the command of the LORD they set out. <sup>21</sup> If sometimes the cloud **remained from evening until morning**, when the cloud was lifted in the morning, they would move out; or if it **remained in the daytime and at night, whenever the cloud was lifted, they would set out.**").
    - 1. So, it did not matter how short the time was between stopping and starting again, Israel had to move when the cloud moved.
    - 2. Again, what God demanded of Israel in their journey may have been very difficult at times.
      - a. If you have ever camped, you know just how much trouble and time-consuming it can be to unpack, set up camp, and then pack up again, especially if you have been walking all day to get to where you are to camp.
      - b. So, if Israel, who were traveling with all that they owned, had to unpack, and set up in the evening only to pack it all up again a few hours later, that **would be hard!**
  - B. So, let's say that some Jews are concerned about how moving on too quickly might be overly difficult for some of their fellow Jews and decide to stay.
    - 1. They point out how some of their brethren are old and tired, and how the small children and young mothers are getting worn out, and how people are complaining, and how if things are not made easier, they might stop following the cloud all together!
    - 2. So, when the cloud rises to move a bit too quickly for their liking, "for the good and salvation of their brethren," they decide to stay put.
    - 3. Of course, as they sit while others are moving, they make it clear that they still intend to follow the cloud and will only stay behind long enough to rest up.
    - 4. Despite their seemingly legitimate and loving concerns, their choice to stay behind:
      - a. Meant **God's presence and guidance went on without them**, dooming them to wandering helplessly and hopelessly in the wilderness.
      - b. Showed a **complete lack of faith** in God's concern for His people and His ability to lead as they should go.
      - c. They defied God's authority (Num. 9:22-23 – "**Whether it was two days or a month or a year** that the cloud lingered over the tabernacle, staying above it, the sons of **Israel**

**remained camped** and **did not set out**; but when it was lifted, they did set out. <sup>23</sup> At the **command of the LORD** they **camped**, and at the **command of the LORD** they **set out**; they kept the LORD'S charge, according to the **command of the LORD** through Moses.”).

- d. The rest they wanted and felt staying behind would achieve, meant **they perished!**
- C. Our journey Christians requires us to move when God says to move.
  - 1. If God says to move and we sit, we sin (Jas. 4:17 – “Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin.”).
  - 2. Jesus never said that following Him would be easy, but spoke of its difficulty and the dangerous allurements of the easy path.
    - a. Following him requires bearing a cross (Mt. 10:38-39 – “And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. <sup>39</sup> He who has found his life will lose it, and he who has lost his life for My sake will find it.”).
    - b. So, we must beware of the easy path (Mt. 7:13-14 – “Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. <sup>14</sup> For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it.”).
  - 3. So, it is not our role to lighten the Lord's conditions and demands:
    - a. To make the way easier for His followers (i.e., reject withdrawal, not preach on the “hard subject,” no rebuke the disobedient, etc.)
    - b. To make the gospel more palatable to the masses! (i.e., do less preaching and more recreation, do not press repentance, etc.)
    - c. For, to do so is to show a lack of faith in Christ as our Lord and Savior and defy His authority and to **perish!**

#### CONCLUSION:

1. I hope I have helped you see how closely connected and vital God's authority expressed in His word is to our journey and successfully reaching our goal of eternal life in heaven. For...
  - A. Those who do not come to appreciate this truth will become frustrated or discouraged and leave God's guidance and become lost in their journey to heaven **and will perish.**
  - B. Those who come understand this vital connection will appreciate God's commands as never being too little or too much, but instead the very words of God leading us to eternal life!
2. Those words of life are offered to you today in hope that you will choose to trust God and allow him to lead you to life eternal with Him in heaven.
3. So, will you come to Christ today in F-R-C-Bp?