

Exodus 13:20-22

Introduction

This morning, we pick up again in Exodus after seven weeks of looking at what the Bible says about evangelism. So far in Exodus:

1. We've seen the people of Israel multiplying in Egypt even as Pharaoh tries to stop them from multiplying.
2. We've seen the special and amazing circumstances surrounding the birth of a baby boy named Moses.
3. We've seen this Moses grow up, and then witnessed his encounter with Yahweh, and his calling at the burning bush.
4. We've seen all of Moses' interactions with Pharaoh and the Ten Plagues, divided into three sets of three and then the final plague of the death of the firstborn.
5. And finally, we've seen the Israelites leave Egypt, not fleeing in disarray, but rather marching out as the hosts of Yahweh Himself.

After all this, the “story” of Exodus slowed way down and we learned about the Feast of Cover-over, the Feast of Unleavened Bread, and the Consecration of the Firstborn (remember all the sandwiches). These things were all meant to help us make *sense* of this story that's being told – the story of God's redemption and deliverance of His people. But after this interlude – after this break in the story – the story has now picked up again in chapter thirteen verses 17-22. These verses make up one unit all together, and together they have one main theme, but they can be divided into three different sections (another sandwich). Let's review the first two sections (the first slice of bread and the filling) before we move on this morning to the third section (or the top slice of bread).

When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not *lead* [*naha*] them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near. For God said, “Lest the people change their minds when they see war and return to Egypt.” But God led the people around by the way of the wilderness toward the Red Sea. (13:17-18a)

We saw in these verses God's faithfulness in the specific way or road that God chose to lead His people. The “way of the Philistines” would have seemed like the obvious road to take because it was by far the fastest and most direct route to Canaan. But God knew that this route would bring Israel prematurely to the “final” test of their faith, and so He chose to lead them by the long, roundabout way through the desert. God knew that the “way of the wilderness” would give His people the time and the experiences that they needed to grow in their faith – in their understanding of the faithfulness and the infinite sufficiency of Yahweh. And so what we're going to see in Israel's experiences “post Egypt” is God's *patience* with us and His *faithfulness* to us as—in His infinite wisdom—He leads us on the road that comes out in the end at our promised inheritance. But what is this promised inheritance – *really*? And exactly when will it be inherited? We read in the next section – the filling of our sandwich:

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And the people of Israel went up out of the land of Egypt equipped for battle. Moses took the bones of Joseph with him, for Joseph had made the sons of Israel solemnly swear, saying, “God will surely visit you, and you shall carry up my bones with you from here.” (13:18b-19)

Can you imagine if you were one of those travelling to Canaan, assigned the task of carrying the coffin in which were the bones of Joseph? As you carry on the road to the promised land the bones of Joseph, you’re reminded—very vividly—that God’s promise was for *Joseph*, too. And so as you carry on the road to the promised land the bones of Joseph, you understand that the land you’re going up to inherit *now* is but a shadow and a symbol of the heavenly country where God is leading all His children. You understand that one day, the very bones that you’re carrying will be raised to life, and Joseph himself will live forever, and ever, and ever in the land that he had been looking for all his life. Today, now that Christ has come, the shadow and the shell of the destructible land of Canaan has been laid aside, and now *together with* Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, and Joseph, and all the believing saints of the Old Testament, we are looking for the promised land of a new heavens and a new earth in which there’s only righteousness, and where we will all live everlastingly in the presence of our God. That’s the destination. That’s what all the hosts of Yahweh were reminded of as they were leaving Egypt like an army ready for battle, carrying up with them the bones of Joseph – now to be buried in the land of Canaan, *by faith*.

So in the first section, we saw the theme of God leading the Israelites on the most unlikely and unexpected road, but the road that He knew was best for His people. In the second section, we were reminded that the destination of God’s people as God leads them along the way is not ultimately a strip of land in Palestine, but the eternal inheritance of the new earth in the resurrection. And so now we’re ready for the third section – the closing “bookend” to these verses:

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And they moved on from Succoth and encamped at Etham, on the edge of the wilderness. And the LORD went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to *lead [naha]* them along the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night. The pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night did not depart from before the people. (13:20-22)

I. Exodus 13:20 — And they moved on from Succoth and encamped at Etham, on the edge of the wilderness.

Back in the first section (or the first slice of bread), we saw that rather than lead His people by the coastal “way of the Philistines,” God led them *around* “by the way of the wilderness toward the Red Sea.” That was kind of the big picture summary – charting the course for the next couple of years. But now here in verse 20, we zoom in closer and find that after moving on from where we last saw them at Succoth (cf. 12:37), the Israelites are now encamped at Etham on the *very “edge”* of the wilderness. In other words, they’ve reached the end of the more inhabited and civilized lands, and now stretching out in front of them is nothing but wilderness – uninhabited, hostile, and dangerous desert. So you could think of this moment as “the deep breath before the plunge.” The Israelites are standing at the edge. And then we read in verse twenty-one:

II. Exodus 13:21 — And the LORD went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them along the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night.¹

We already saw in verses 17 and 18 that God was leading (*naha*) His people. But what did that mean? How was He leading them? Was God simply telling His people which way to go, so that they “followed” God just by going in the direction that He said to go? One of our biggest problems in reading of Scripture is how very much we take for granted. How often do we take for granted that “of course” this is not how God led His people? “*Of course* God’s leading of His people wasn’t just telling them from His throne in the heavens which direction to go.” But what right do we have to take these things for granted? Wouldn’t this already be far more than we deserve? It’s only when we have *this* mindset that we can even begin to fully “appreciate” how God actually *did* “lead” His people.

God led His people not by giving them directions from His throne in the heavens, but rather by “coming down” *Himself* to go before His people in the visible form of a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. Listen again to these astonishing words: “And *Yahweh* went before them.” Not a servant of Yahweh, no matter how high and exalted, and not a messenger of Yahweh, but Yahweh *Himself*. So yes, the wilderness is still the wilderness—uninhabited, hostile, dangerous – but for the Israelites, standing on the very edge of that wilderness, it’s not just the wilderness that they see. Because there, also visible before them, is the manifestation of the glory of God who is *Himself* with them, and leading the way.

Now we know that no one can see God in His unveiled glory and live to tell about it. So when God came down to lead His people through the wilderness, in what way, or what form did He veil Himself? You see, God veils Himself in order to show Himself. God hides Himself in order to reveal Himself. So *how* God has *veiled and hidden Himself* will actually show us a great deal about who He is, and help us to see Him in as clear and beautiful a way as we could ever need to see Him. So we read with true anticipation and baited breath: “The LORD went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them along the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night.”

¹ Ps. 78:14; 99:7; Exod. 40:34–38; Num. 9:15-23; 10:33–36; Deut. 1:32–33; Neh. 9:18–19; 1 Cor. 10:1

We need to be careful what we think of when we say “in” a pillar of cloud or “in” a pillar of fire. It’s not as though God was in some kind of a “container.” Maybe it would be better to say that God went before His people “as” a pillar of cloud by day and “as” a pillar of fire by night. (cf. Currid) But then again, we have to be careful that we don’t actually think that God *is* a cloud, or that God is fire! Do you see what a mystery this is – that it could even be possible for *God* to show Himself to us *at all*?! And yet He has. And here in Exodus 13, He shows *Himself* to His people as *He* goes before them in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.

From other passages, it’s clear that there’s only one pillar.

- Exodus 14:24 — In the morning watch the LORD *in the pillar of fire and of cloud* looked down on the Egyptian forces.
- Exodus 40:38 — The cloud of the LORD was on the tabernacle by day, *and fire was in it [in the cloud²] by night*, in the sight of all the house of Israel.

So what’s the meaning of all this? Well, fire and cloud are both things that are very often associated with the presence of Yahweh. How many of us, when we think of the cloud, think of a fluffy white cloud? And how many of us, when we think of the fire at night, think of something bit, and yet also “tame” and calm, and very under control? Why do we do this? What does this say about the ways we’ve reshaped God in our own imaginations? Is the god in our minds really God at all?

In the Bible, when clouds are used to describe the glory of God’s presence, we’re usually meant to think of “thunderclouds” which bring darkness, and shadow, and even fire.

- Psalm 18:9–12 (cf. Joel 2:1-2; 1 Kings 8:12; Psalm 97:2) — He bowed the heavens and came down; *thick darkness* was under his feet. He rode on a cherub and flew; he came swiftly on the wings of the wind. He made *darkness* his covering, his canopy around him, *thick clouds dark with water*. Out of the *brightness* before him hailstones and *coals of fire broke through his clouds*.

The Psalmist speaks of the “darkness” which is God’s covering, and yet also the “brightness” that is before Him! He speaks of coals of fire breaking through His clouds! Genesis 15 doesn’t use the word “cloud,” but it seems to be using all of the same imagery for the presence of God:

- Genesis 15:12, 17 — A deep sleep fell on Abram. And behold, *dreadful and great darkness* fell upon him... When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a *smoking fire pot and a flaming torch*...

Here again is darkness and smoke, and yet at the same time the light of a flaming (a consuming or a raging) torch. Listen to the prophet Ezekiel’s description of the glory of God:

- Ezekiel 1:4 — As I looked, behold, a stormy wind came out of the north, and *a great cloud, with brightness around it, and fire flashing forth continually*.

² NRSV; HCSB; NIV; NLT; NCV

And now, finally, listen to how Moses describes the appearance of God's glory when he came down on Mount Sinai to give Israel His Law:

- Deuteronomy 5:22 — These words the LORD spoke to all your assembly at the mountain out of the midst of *the fire, the cloud, and the thick darkness*.
- Deuteronomy 4:11 — The mountain *burned with fire* to the heart of heaven, *wrapped in darkness, cloud, and gloom*.

In all of these passages, the darkness seems to be a covering for the fire. We might picture the fire burning and glowing deep in the heart of the thick cloud. So why, when we hear about Yahweh Himself going before His people in a pillar of cloud by day do we think of a white, fluffy, “harmless” cloud? We read in the very next chapter of Exodus – verses 19-20:

- Exodus 14:19–20 — Then the angel of God who was going before the host of Israel moved and went behind them, and the pillar of cloud moved from before them and stood behind them, coming between the host of Egypt and the host of Israel. And there was *the cloud and the darkness*. And it *lit up the night* without one coming near the other all night.

Years later, Joshua remembered this day:

- Joshua 24:7 (cf. Exod. 40:34-35) — When they cried to the LORD, he put *darkness* between you and the Egyptians.

Why, when we hear about Yahweh Himself going before His people in a pillar of fire by night do we think of a tame, and calm, and very under control fire? We read about this *very same* fire in Leviticus chapter ten:

- Leviticus 10:1–2 — Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron... offered unauthorized fire before the LORD, which he had not commanded them. And fire came out from before the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD.

And then again, when 250 leaders in Israel rebelled against Moses:

- Numbers 16:35 — Fire came out from the LORD and consumed the 250 men.

This fire and cloud here in Exodus 13 is the same fire and cloud that appears throughout all the rest of Scripture. And yet the *miracle* of Exodus thirteen is that this same cloud and this same fire have become for Israel not a source of dread and fear, but rather a source now of guidance, and protection, and blessing. So at night, the fire *burns brightly enough* in the heart of the thick cloud to provide just *enough* light for the entire nation of Israel to travel by.

- Nehemiah 9:12 — By a pillar of fire [you led them] in the night to light for them the way in which they should go.

But in the daytime, when the sun had risen, the thick cloud was enough to hide the blazing fire inside, and so rather than appearing as a pillar of fire, it could appear now as a pillar of cloud.

Now think about this: If the Israelites needed light for travel at night, then certainly what they needed for travel under the hot desert sun was shade. And so even as we imagine a pillar of dark, thick cloud going before the people, we might also imagine that as it reached up into the sky, it spread out over all the people providing a canopy and a shelter from the sun's heat.

- Numbers 14:14 — You, O LORD, are in the midst of this people... For... your cloud *stands over them* and you go before them, in a pillar of cloud by day and in a pillar of fire by night.
- Psalm 105:39 — He spread a cloud *for a covering*, and fire to give light by night.

So here in Exodus thirteen, we have the intensity of a blazing fire veiled by an exceedingly thick, dark cloud—with the result that in the heat of the day it appears as a cloud for shade, but during the darkness of night it appears as a pillar of fire lighting up the way for Israel to go. It is *Yahweh Himself* who comes down to go before His people—we're assured of this by the blazing fire and the thick cloud. But when Yahweh comes down to lead His people, He does this as a Shepherd, tenderly leading His flock—and *this also* we've seen this morning in the blazing fire and the thick cloud! What an astonishing, amazing, awesome mystery! Yes, God is "dangerous"; or as C.S. Lewis would say, He's not at all "tame." He may not appear in the fluffy white cloud, or in a calm and harmless fire. But isn't this just the thing that should make us wholly willing to trust Him and follow Him when *He* goes before us as our *Shepherd*?

As Israel stands now on the very "*edge* of the wilderness," God doesn't send them travel directions from heaven. Instead, He comes down to them Himself in the blazing fire wrapped in the dark thundercloud – *or* we could say, in the pillar of cloud for shade by day, and in the pillar of fire for light by night. Brothers and sisters, isn't this exactly what we have in Christ? – only infinitely better? In Christ, the dark thundercloud and the blazing fire has come down to us, wrapped in human flesh, in order to be *with us* as our Shepherd. As Israel looked ahead at the uninhabited, hostile, dangerous wilderness, they could also see the visible manifestation of the glory of Yahweh who was *Himself* going *with* them, and *leading* the way! The Psalmist celebrates:

- Psalm 78:52 — Then he led out his people like sheep and guided them in the wilderness like a flock.

But Israel's journey through the Sinai desert to the Promised Land of Canaan was only a picture and a type of the journey of all God's true children through the wilderness of this world to arrive in the end at the new heavens and the new earth. And it's for *this* journey through the desert that God Himself has come down to *us* in Jesus Christ, to go *with us* and lead the way. Jesus said:

- John 8:12 — I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.

We used to be blinded to the will of God, believing the lies of our enemy. But not anymore! Jesus has opened our eyes to walk in the light of all that is plainly and clearly revealed to us in Scripture. We used to despair at the darkness and the hopelessness of this world. But not anymore! Now even in our darkest night, we still have the light of Christ who goes before us and lights our way, replacing our despair always with hope and the promises of His Word. Jesus said:

- John 10:11 — I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

A shepherd is a refuge, and a protection, and a shelter for His sheep, and in Christ, this is all that we have, and more. So Paul says:

- Philippians 4:6–7 — Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.
- 2 Thessalonians 3:3 — The Lord is faithful. He will establish you and guard you against the evil one.

In Psalm 121, this shelter and protection is pictured as a cloud, or perhaps a tree, that shades from the heat of the sun.

- Psalm 121:5–8 (cf. Psalm 99:1-6; Psalm 23) — The LORD is your keeper; the LORD is your shade on your right hand. The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night. The LORD will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life. The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forevermore.

We may wish today for the flaming fire wrapped in thick cloud lighting *our* way at night and giving *us* shelter and shade in the day. But the truth is that the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire was only a type and a shadow of **Christ** who *is*, today, our shade and our light. And then there's this; we read in verse twenty-two:

III. Exodus 13:22 — The pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night did not *depart from before the people*.

How much more can we know today that Christ will never leave us or forsake us? (Heb. 13:5) How much more can we know today that He is **with us always**, even to the end of the age? (Mat. 28:20) What a faithful Shepherd He is – every single day of our lives.

Conclusion

One day, after our journey through the wilderness, we'll all arrive safe and sound in the new heavens and the new earth. Listen to how the prophet Isaiah describes that day:

- Isaiah 4:5–6 — Then the LORD will create over the whole site of Mount Zion and over her assemblies a cloud by day, and smoke and the shining of a flaming fire by night; for over all the glory there will be a canopy. There will be a booth for shade by day from the heat, and for a refuge and a shelter from the storm and rain.
- Isaiah 40:10–11 — He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.

And then we read in Revelation chapter seven:

- Revelation 7:15–17 — Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.