

THE PILLAR OF A CLOUD

TEXT: NUMBERS 9:15—23

Introduction:

1. Exodus 13:18 tells us that God led His people about, through the way of the wilderness. There were millions of them, and they had no compass, no map, and no guide. There were no signposts.
2. How were they to find their way? A few verses down, we see how God led them – by “the pillar of cloud” by day, and “the pillar of fire by night.”
3. The “pillar of a cloud” first appears in Exodus 13:21, 22, “And the LORD went before them by day in a pillar of a cloud, to lead them the way...”
4. In his biography of George Müller, AT Pierson wrote, “The pillar of cloud and fire is a symbol of that divine leadership which guides both as to forward steps and intervals of rest. Mr. Müller found it blessed to follow, one step at a time, as God ordered his way, and to stand still and wait when He seemed to call for a halt.”
5. The pillar of cloud was more than a symbol of God’s leadership; it was the visible representation of the invisible God.
6. The pillar of cloud by day, and pillar of fire by night is a beautiful picture of the Holy Spirit.
7. Numbers 12:5 says, “And the LORD came down in the pillar of the cloud.”
8. Deuteronomy 31:15 says, “And the LORD appeared in the tabernacle in a pillar of a cloud.”
9. Romans 8:14 says, “For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God.” The Holy Spirit leads Spirit-filled believers.
10. Just as the pillar of cloud led the Israelites through the wilderness, the Holy Spirit directs those that are submissive to His will. AT Pierson said, “The meek soul simply and humbly waits, and *watches the moving of the Pillar.*”
11. Psalm 37:23 says, “The steps of a good man are ordered by the LORD: and he delighteth in his way.” George Müller used to say, “that the stops, as well as the steps, of a good man are ordered of the Lord.”
12. When the pillar of cloud stopped, the people stopped. And when the pillar of cloud moved, the people moved (Numbers 9:15-23).
13. Note the repetition in this passage in Numbers 9. The Holy Spirit is trying to impress upon our minds that when He tells us to stop, we are to stop. And when He tells us to move, we are to move.

I. THE PILLAR PROVIDED STRENGTH

II. THE PILLAR PROVIDED GUIDANCE

III. THE PILLAR PROVIDED LIGHT

I. THE PILLAR PROVIDED STRENGTH

1. A pillar is a column used to support a building. The children of Israel were not led by a shapeless, hovering cloud. No, they were led by a “pillar of cloud” (cf. Exodus 13:21, 22; 14:19; Num. 12:5; 14:14; Deut. 31:15; Neh. 9:19).
2. A pillar indicates strength. The Israelites needed to be strong as they left Egypt for the Promised Land. They were pursued by Pharaoh’s army. They had to cross the Red Sea by faith.
3. Humanly speaking, it looked like the LORD was leading Israel to her doom. They were in a tight spot indeed – the Red Sea in front of them, and Pharaoh’s horsemen and chariots behind them.
4. But God was not leading them into the place of destruction; He was leading them into the place of blessing. It was the Egyptians who were heading for destruction. God was leading the Israelites to safety (Ex. 14:19-31).
5. The Holy Spirit wants to guide us the same way but we have to obey His voice. Earlier I mentioned the biography of George Müller, written by AT Pierson. It is entitled, *George Müller of Bristol*.
6. Dr. Pierson wrote, “If it is the Pillar of God we are following, the Red Sea will not dismay us, for it will furnish but another scene for the display of the power of Him who can make the waters to stand up as an heap, and to become a wall about us as we go through the sea on dry ground.”
7. George Müller understood this, and said, “*I had a secret satisfaction in the greatness of the difficulties which were in the way. So far from being cast down on account of them, they delighted my soul; for I only desired to do the will of the Lord in this matter.*”
8. In other words, George Müller understood that the Holy Spirit was guiding him step by step, just as the pillar of cloud led the children of Israel.
9. These are some of the lessons we can learn from the pillar of cloud.
 - The children of Israel were totally dependent upon the LORD for guidance (and food and everything else as well). We too must depend on God.
 - They had to look up for guidance. So must we.
 - If we encounter difficulties or hindrances, we must pray to determine if they are from God. If God is closing a door, it is for our good. Perhaps God is telling us to wait (Num. 9:19, 22).
 - Perhaps God is teaching us patience. Sometimes the pillar of cloud tarried for a year (Num. 9:22).
 - If the hindrance is from the devil, we should pray and trust God. Hindrances and obstacles should not cause unrest or

anxiety because God answers prayer (cf. I John 5:14, 15), and He will surely remove all obstacles.

- If our plans are not according to God's will, we should be happy that He has stopped us. All too often, self-will and selfish motives are pointed out to us by the Holy Spirit. It often takes a door slammed in our face to get us on our knees.
- In I Thess. 2:18, the apostle Paul says, "Wherefore we would have come unto you, even I Paul, once and again; but Satan hindered us." This did not discourage Paul because he knew God was allowing Satan to hinder him and his coworkers.
- When hindrances, obstacles, and delays vex us, we are to pray more earnestly. If God wants us to move forward, He will remove all obstacles (Acts 12:5-7).
- Throughout their pilgrim journey, the pillar of cloud never left the children of Israel. The Holy Spirit will never leave us. Ephesians 1:13 says, "Ye were sealed with that holy Spirit of promise."
- Ephesians 4:30 says, "And grieve not the holy Spirit of God, whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption."
- Exodus 13:21, 22 says, "And the LORD went before them by day in a pillar of a cloud, to lead them the way; and by night in a pillar of fire, to give them light; to go by day and night: He took not away the pillar of the cloud by day, nor the pillar of fire by night, from before the people."

II. THE PILLAR PROVIDED GUIDANCE

1. The Israelites had the pillar of cloud to guide them, but we have something they did not have – the complete Word of God.
2. The Israelites needed the pillar of cloud to show them the way, but we have Jesus, who told us, "I am the way..."
3. You will notice an expression found often in the Bible, and it is found seven times in this passage of Scripture – "At the commandment of the LORD..." (Num. 9:18, 20, 23).
4. God has given us many commandments (a lot more than ten). If we want His guidance and we want His blessing, we must obey His commandments.
5. Consider what our Lord said in John 14, "And whatsoever ye shall ask in my name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If ye shall ask any thing in my name, I will do it. If ye love me, keep my commandments" (John 14:13-15).

6. If you want the Lord to guide and direct you, you must be willing to obey all His commandments.
7. The Bible says in James 4, that it is wrong to make plans without getting guidance from God. “For that ye ought to say, If the Lord will, we shall live, and do this, or that” (James 4:15).
8. We must be completely submissive to the will of God. “The meek will He guide in judgment: and the meek will He teach His way” (Psalm 25:9).
9. If you are unfamiliar with the story of the pillar of cloud, you might think that the pillar of cloud moved regularly every morning, and then the pillar of fire moved regularly every night (like clockwork).
10. However, that was not the case at all. The pillar might linger for a day or two – sometimes for “two days, or a month, or a year” (Num. 9:22).
11. In other words, God does not always lead us the same way, and in the same manner, etc. His clock and His schedule are much different than ours.
12. William Cowper wrote:

“God moves in a mysterious way,
His wonders to perform;
He plants his footsteps in the sea,
And rides upon the storm.

Deep in unfathomable mines
Of never failing skill,
He treasures up his bright designs,
And works his sovereign will.”
13. But whether the pillar of cloud moved or whether the pillar of cloud tarried – the pillar of cloud was always with the children of Israel.
14. The pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night signified the presence of the Lord to the Israelites.
15. The pillar of cloud is in our Bible to teach us the importance of the presence of God. The leading of the Lord is based on the certainty of the presence of the Lord.
16. Hebrews 13:5 says, “For he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee.”
17. Our Lord said in Matthew 28:20, “Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.”

18. Psalm 32:8 says, "I will instruct thee and teach thee in the way which thou shalt go."
19. Isaiah 58:11 says, "And the LORD shall guide thee continually."
20. WG Heslop said, "To watch for the movings and marchings, stoppings and goings of the Holy Spirit is a fine art. To mind His checks, yield to His gentle entreaties, and listen to His voice means profit and blessing, growth and glory while traveling the holy way" (*Nuggets from Numbers*).
21. God gave Israel His presence to guide them on their way. And God has given us His presence to guide us along our way. The songwriter wrote:
 "Pardon for sin and a peace that endureth
Thine own dear presence to cheer and to guide."

III. THE PILLAR PROVIDED LIGHT

1. When the night shadows began to fall, the pillar of cloud turned into a pillar of fire (Num. 9:15, 16).
2. What an awesome sight to behold! Better than any fireworks display. And the children of Israel saw this transformation every night.
3. Psalm 105:39 says, "He spread a cloud for a covering; and fire to give light in the night."
4. Our Lord said in John 8:12, "I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life."
5. "How beautiful to walk in the steps of the Savior,
 Stepping in the light, stepping in the light,
 How beautiful to walk in the steps of the Savior,
 Led in paths of light."
6. I looked it up and discovered that the word "light" occurs 272 times in our King James Bible.
7. "Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path" (Psalm 119:105).
8. "The entrance of thy words giveth light" (Ps. 119:130).
9. "But the path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day" (Proverbs 4:18).
10. "For the commandment is a lamp; and the law is light" (Pro. 6:23).
11. John 1:9 says, Jesus "was the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world."
12. Our Lord said, "As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world" (John 9:5).
13. In John 12:36, our Lord said, "While ye have light, believe in the light, that ye may be the children of light."

14. And, "I am come a light into the world, that whosoever believeth on me should not abide in darkness" (John 12:46).
15. Ephesians 5:8 says, "For ye were sometimes darkness, but now are ye light in the Lord: walk as children of light."
16. First Peter 2:9 says, God hath called us "out of darkness into His marvellous light."
17. First John 1:7 says, "But if we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanseth us from all sin."

CONCLUSION:

1. Deuteronomy 8:15 says the LORD led the children of Israel "through that great and terrible wilderness."
2. Sometimes this world appears to us as a "great and terrible wilderness." We need the Lord to guide us, to direct us, and to help us.
3. But for that to happen, we have to be totally dependent upon Him.
4. The great Bible teacher CH Mackintosh said it would not be possible to find "a more lovely picture of absolute dependence upon and subjection to divine guidance" than what we see here in Numbers 9.
5. Are you depending upon the Lord today (and every day)?