

The March Through the Wilderness (Part 3 – Divine Presence)

Last week, we considered the rock that Moses struck and water came forth in abundance to provide for the people. Concerning this story Paul says in 1 Cor. 10:4 that they **“all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ.”** In other words, there are NO blessings (OT or NT) that come down to the people of God (or this world for that matter) that do not come down to us through the Son of God. Today, we will continue this theme, but move to another picture, the pillar of cloud by which God led his people. This is none other than the divine presence. God is with his people. As God dwelled with his people and led his people through the pillar of cloud in the desert, so God is with his people today and leads us through Christ. Exod. 13:21-22 says: **“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. The pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night did not depart from before the people.”** This morning I want to highlight 3 ways the divine presence of Christ is pictured in the pillar of fire and cloud: 1) As light, 2) As Splendor, and 3) As fire. So let’s begin.

1. As light Christ is the manifestation of all truth. Before moving specifically to the picture of “light,” I want to begin with some explanation. In our text God’s presence is described as a “pillar of cloud.” This “cloud” was given right from the beginning as the Hebrews came out of Egypt to lead the people. When Pharaoh came out against them at the Red Sea, the cloud moved behind the people for protection. In Exod. 14:19-20 we read: **“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.”** From time to time, this “cloud of glory,” when needed would appear with Moses as He went up on the mountain. Or, after the tabernacle was built, it would appear over it, as God saw fit to communicate his awe, or even his judgment upon his people. The Hebrew words picture this manifestation as a cloud rising to heaven in the shape of a column. During the day it seems that this cloud would expand and even give some type of shade or curtain between the Israelites and the sun. And by night it would change to fire to give light. Ps. 105:39 says, **“He spread a cloud for covering, and fire to give light by night.”** But, always, there was the picture of “glory” or “splendor.” And in all these ways . . . by light, by fire, by awesome splendor, the presence of God was pictured, particularly his character.

The first picture we see is light. As light, it manifests God as the fountain of all truth. When I come home at night and cannot see, the first thing I do is turn on the lights. Then I can see. I know what I am looking at. We’ve heard people say when they discover the truth, *“I have seen the light.”* In the desert, Israel saw the light. I think of Isaiah 60:1:2 where He says, **“Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory for the Lord has risen upon you. For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you.”** The One and True God made himself known to Israel. 1 John 1:5-6 says, **“This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth.”**

Today, God reveals Himself, his presence, not by a pillar of cloud, but by his Son. Heb. 1:1-3 says: “**Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son . . . He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature . . .**” Jesus is called “Immanuel” (Is. 7:14; Matt. 1:23), which means “God with us.” The Son of God took on flesh. In the pillar of cloud, they saw through a “veil.” But, of Jesus John says, “*We’ve seen him. We’ve touched him. We’ve beheld his glory.*” (Consider the transfiguration in Matt. 17). And Jesus Himself tells us: “**I am the light of the world . . . Those who follow me will not walk in darkness**” (John 8:12; 9:5). He says, “**I am the way, the truth, and the life . . .**” Today, we do not see God in a pillar of cloud by day or fire by night, we see God in the Son. Jesus says, “**If you’ve seen me you’ve seen the Father**” (John 14:9).

Application: As Christians, as those who believe in Christ, we walk in truth. We understand what God is like. We get the big picture. The ways of this world and the philosophies of this world may contain “truth.” But, they cannot reveal God, who is truth. And if our truth does not find its origin in the revelation of God, we are misled. The glory of the Father shines forth in Christ as full of grace and truth. He alone has revealed the Father, and can give the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him. And so we know and remember as we take the Lord’s Supper this morning.

2. As splendor Christ is the manifestation of All God’s perfections. The pillar of cloud is often described as “radiant splendor,” also called the “glory” of the Lord. In the cloud there is light. There is also a deep “darkness” which represents the unknowable depths of God’s knowledge and the fact that God is set apart from his creation. In the cloud there is also fire, which we will see in a moment. But, behind all these physical manifestations, the way we describe this pillar is in the word “glory” or “splendor.” In this pillar of cloud the people knew the presence of God. They didn’t wonder, “Who is this?” . . . It was God, the true and perfect God. Throughout the OT we see the “glory of the Lord” come down upon the people. And there is no mistaking these manifestations.

Israel saw the great power of God in their deliverance. I can’t imagine the first time the pillar of cloud showed up in the beginning as God led them. And then at the Red Sea as this cloud of glory protected them from the armies. And then on the other side as the cloud led them through the desert. And right before God sent the quail and the manna his glory appeared in the cloud. When Moses went up on the mountain, the glory of the Lord appeared around the mountain. And later, over the tabernacle. And at times like the rebellion of Korah, the glory of the Lord appeared to all the people before Korah and his clan were swallowed up by the ground. Later when Solomon dedicated the temple, the glory of the Lord filled the entire place. And in all these times the people knew this was glory of God. There was no mistaking his presence.

Today, in the Gospel of Christ, Jesus says, “**I have come to show you the Father.**” In Christ, God does not merely give us a pillar of cloud. He takes on flesh and lives among us. And though his divinity is veiled by his humanity, his people do not mistake him for just a man. Instead, they see him for who he is: God in the flesh, not just a man, not just an angel, but God.

The apostles often remind their readers of this fact. John 1:14: **“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.”** In his first letter he says, **“That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us.”** Peter says the same in his second letter as he spoke of Jesus’ transfiguration: **“For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For when he received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory . . .”** (2 Pet. 1:16-17).

Today, as we celebrate the Lord’s Supper, we do not have the pillar of cloud. We have the Son, who is the glory of the Father. In 2 Cor. 3:12-18, speaking of the New Covenant (which we celebrate in the Lord’s Supper) Paul says, we are not like **“Moses, who would put a veil over his face so that the Israelites might not gaze at the outcome of what was being brought to an end . . . But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed . . . And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.”**

3. As fire, Christ is the manifestation of God’s consuming power and holiness. In all the descriptions of the pillar of cloud, fire is always present. Even though the light is dim in the day, there is still fire behind the light. And at particular times, this fire was awful and terrible. When God especially needed the people to know his presence, particularly when they sinned against him, or when Moses went up on the mountain to receive God’s laws, we see “fire” and even “smoke.” Exod. 19:18 says: **“Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the LORD had descended on it in fire. The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly.”** This picture is more about God as a consuming fire, the One who comes in holy Judgment.

The very same things in the OT to describe God are used to describe the Son. In the first chapters of Revelation, speaking of Jesus, we read: **“In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength”** (Rev. 1:16). These words are in the context of repentance. For those who do not repent, Christ will come in judgment.

In Rev. 19:11-16: **“Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems, and he has a name written that no one knows but himself. He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God. And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses. From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, King of kings and Lord of lords.”** Brothers and sisters, the same holiness, the same awesome power, the same right to judge, is given to the Son. Heb. 4:12-13 says: **“For**

the word of God (the Son) is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.”

Brothers and sisters, this is the one we remember in the Lord’s Supper! He is God . . . in the flesh . . . And all authority with all its power and judgment is given to him. I think of Phil. 2:6-11: which says: **“who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”**

Now, briefly by way of application, the pillar of cloud in the dessert was meant to show the divine character of God, which we also find in the Lord Jesus. But, the pillar of cloud was also given for guidance and protection. Jesus is the Captain of our salvation, through whom we find guidance and protection in this life. As the pillar of cloud led Israel to Canaan, so Christ leads us to heaven. By His word and by his Spirit he leads us into all truth. He sanctifies us that we become more godly on the way. In our trials and temptations our captain has gone before us. He knows because He took on flesh. He is not the “divine presence” from afar (which is the case in every other religion). No religion can say such things! Jesus lived as we lived in every way (except sin). He is able to sympathize and empathize with us. He is able to understand, not as an outsider, but as the son of man. And all of this that he might be the captain of our salvation. And the greatest act with the greatest outcome is his death on the cross that we remember today. None of the blessings of God can be known and experienced without the death, resurrection, ascension of our Lord! He has overcome all obstacles that we may know the Father. And not just know Him, but to be united with Him. In John 17 Jesus reveals the purpose of his coming as he prays, **“that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one . . .”** (John 17:21–22).
What a captain!

In conclusion, today we remember that Christ is the great deliverer. Christ is the manna. Christ is the rock from which the water flows. Christ is the pillar of fire by night and the cloud by day. He is the divine presence. And so we see him today pictured in the Supper we take together. And by faith, we “eat his flesh” and “drink his blood,” knowing that apart from Him we receive nothing. And, apart from him we can do nothing!