

The Pillar of Cloud and of Fire

a sermon by the Rev. Michael Gladish
Mitchellville, MD., November 6th, 2011

“...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. And He did not take away the pillar of cloud by day or the pillar of fire by night from before the people” (Exodus 13:21-22).

If there is ONE major theme in the Old Testament, it is the acknowledgment, worship and obedience of the Lord, Jehovah, in the light of His Word. So in the book of Psalms we read, “Your Word is a *lamp* to my feet and a *light* to my path.” And this is just one of countless references to the fact that His laws, His commandments, His testimonies, His teachings *give light* that brings understanding so that we can *see* how to live.

So also in the New Testament Jesus said, “I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life” (John 8:12). And this again is just one of many references in which the Lord, as God incarnate, pleads with people to understand that His mission, His purpose in the world was to bring the light of truth into the darkness of human life. Remember, the whole Gospel of John begins this way: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory...” Here and elsewhere in the Scriptures *glory* is a reference to the brightness of the **light** of God’s love and wisdom. So we read about “the glory of the Lord” shining around the angels when His birth was announced, or the brilliant glory of His transfiguration, or again, His prediction that He would come *again* “in the clouds of heaven with **great power and glory**” (Mark 13:26).

Just imagine for a moment, clouds and glory. Think about the big, billowing grey and white *nimbus* clouds that often bring rain or snow, and then picture the bright morning or evening sun breaking through and sending radiant streams of light pouring out of them as if the Lord Himself were there.

Now think about the spiritual correspondence of such clouds and light. Of course the light corresponds to truth. That’s why we talk about “seeing the light,” or seeing in the light of truth, which really means understanding. The clearer and brighter the light, the bolder and plainer the expression of truth until it becomes, as we say, **glaring**, or even painful.

On the other hand clouds obscure the sun, and often bring rain. Think of the *great thunder clouds* that can suddenly move in and darken the sky. And yet some light almost always gets through – if not sunlight then perhaps *lightning* that streaks through the clouds. In fact clouds act as a filter for the sun and if you can imagine the blazing heat of a long day on the beach or in the desert you can understand the real benefit that clouds can provide by tempering that heat and radiation. Cloud cover at night may also trap the warmth of an autumn day and keep the frost away from tender plants. On the other hand heavy clouds during the day can keep the earth from warming up at all, and dense clouds or fog can make it hard to see. For all these and other reasons clouds represent obscure perception, or a sort of veiled appearance of the truth, as when it’s unclear, or fleeting, or hard to understand.

Still, this isn't all bad. Sometimes it's important for the truth to be veiled, not only to protect it from abuse and profanation but more importantly to protect *people* from knowledge and awareness that might be totally overwhelming. It's not that the truth shouldn't be known, but *sensitivity and timing are important*. For example, a small child doesn't need to be told all the gory details of her grandmother's debilitating cancer; she just needs to know that Grandma isn't well and that she needs a lot of rest, help and attention. Also, what's the point of teaching calculus to a person who hasn't mastered basic math? Or why would we teach a love-struck or hormone-driven teenager how to enjoy the delights of sexual intimacy – safely or otherwise? The Lord gives us *appropriate conditions* so that we can learn things at a pace and in an order that will help and not hurt us or lead us into temptation.

Besides, ironically, although it IS ultimately the truth that makes us free (John 8:32), sometimes it is necessary for us to be left in some uncertainty about the truth so that we can *feel* free. For then we tend to make our decisions based on our loves, and doing what we *want* to do is what gives us that sense of freedom, whether it is the real thing or just an illusion.

So we come to the story about the pillar of cloud that led the Israelites by day and the pillar of fire that gave them light through the night. Not only is this a very *interesting* part of the Exodus story, it is very important and of course highly symbolic. For it relates to each one of us in our daily lives in terms of how the Lord leads us, and how we are to follow Him in our spiritual journey to the promised land.

Our third lesson this morning reviewed the whole context of the lesson from Exodus and explained the spiritual sense of it. In addition to that reading the pillar of cloud is mentioned again in the next chapter where we read about the crossing of the Red Sea. And there we find that the cloud is referred to as *the Angel of God*, which “went from before them and stood between them” and the Egyptians. “Thus it was a cloud of 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” (Ex. 14:19-20).

Another curious reference at the end of the book of Exodus, a full year after Israel had left Egypt, describes how the Israelites set up the tabernacle for the first time at Sinai and then a special *cloud* covered the tabernacle, and *the glory of the Lord* filled it. There we read that as long as the cloud “rested” on the tabernacle the people stayed where they were and camped, but when the cloud went up and moved, then they got up and moved with it. And it was a pillar of cloud by day but had the appearance of fire by night.

Finally, in the book of Numbers this description is repeated, only in greater detail, and we are told that no matter how long the cloud rested on the tabernacle, whether it was a day, two days, a month or a year, “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...” (Num. 9:15-23).

Now what does all this mean?

First of all, what is a journey? What is it to *go* from place to place? In the spiritual sense it must be obvious that this is to go from one spiritual state to another, from one affection or one way of thinking to another (in common terms, from “where we're at” to “another place” in our heads),

hopefully to make some sort of spiritual progress in life. And if our goal is to reach the “promised land” of heaven, or a truly heavenly state, clearly we must follow the Lord’s Word.

So the pillar of cloud – really a pillar of water! – is the Word. It is the truth, or our perception of the truth *in its veiled or accommodated form*, moderating the intense heat and light (and radiation) of the spiritual sun so that we are not exposed to more than we can tolerate or accept at any given time. It is the literal sense of the Word, the literal story through which the light of heaven shines – sometimes very darkly, indirectly and obscurely but sometimes with great power and glory. It is the *message* of Divine Truth put in material and worldly terms so that we can receive it in the form of simple narrative and sensory images that rest in our minds as a *basis* for our deeper thought and reflection. This is why the cloud was called a pillar and appeared in that form: the literal stories of the Word form a *basis* and *support* for the spiritual meaning that rests on them and is contained in them, as a tall building rests on pillars for strength (AC 8106:4).

Besides, a pillar with its height conveys a concept of truth in all its many levels or degrees of perfection, from highest to lowest, from the celestial through the spiritual to the natural, from willing through thinking to doing.

But remember, this pillar of cloud that showed up in contrast to the light of day became a pillar of fire by night. And this is an awesome representation of how the Lord leads us through His Word. For as we know, day or daylight corresponds to a state of enlightenment, a state when we can see our situation, understand our problems, and recognize the authority of the Word. It is a state of spiritual wakefulness, awareness, and confidence. In such states when we go to the Word, we may be delighted with the stories and lessons we learn, and we certainly will find instruction there, but as a cloud represents obscurity we may also find that we are challenged to understand the true meaning and application of the Word to our lives. In other words, our confidence and perception will be tempered and softened by a degree of uncertainty. This not only keeps us humble but it preserves and protects our personal freedom so that we do not feel compelled to think or do things just exactly one certain way. So we read,

“It is according to the laws of order that no one ought to be persuaded about truth in a moment, that is to say, that truth should be so confirmed in a moment as to leave no doubt whatever about it, because the truth which is so impressed becomes persuasive truth, and is devoid of any extension, and also of any yielding quality. *Such truth is represented in the other life as hard, and as such that it does not admit good into it so as to become applicable.* Hence it is that as soon as in the other life any truth is presented before good spirits by a manifest experience, there is soon afterward presented something opposite which causes doubt. In this way it is given them to *think about it*, and to consider whether it be so, and to collect reasons, and thus *to bring that truth into their minds rationally.* By this there is effected an extension in the spiritual sight in respect to that truth, even to its opposites; and thence it sees and perceives in the understanding all the quality of the truth...” (AC 7298).

On the other hand we know that night-time or the darkness of night corresponds to a *lack* of understanding and spiritual perception. When we are in such states we are confused, we lose perspective, and we don’t see our spiritual situation or the goals the Lord has set before us very

clearly. Then when we go to the Word it is important for us not just to see more cloud and darkness. So the Lord turns the cloud into a pillar of fire!

Now think about this! Here we are in our darkness, and as we turn to the Lord He gives us light – but it is not the light of understanding in any cold, intellectual sense, it is the light that comes from a pillar of FIRE. And fire corresponds to love or affection. So what the Lord is showing us in this particular part of the story is that when we are confused, when we lack confidence, when we don't understand what's going on in our lives, what we can look for and what we will find in the Word is the *guidance that comes from the goodness of love*. Even if we don't understand “the mysteries of faith” or the deeper secrets of the spiritual sense of the Word, if we look to the Lord in humility and prayer He will lead us *by showing us His love, mercy, patience and compassion*. So just as our states of enlightenment are tempered by obscurity, our states of obscurity are tempered by our recognition of the Lord's tender care. And here again our freedom is preserved.

For example, notice the Psalms and sometimes the Prophets: when we read these books of the Word we will not always get clear *instruction* about what to do, but we may get a powerful sense of the Lord's care and compassion. No doubt this is the reason we so often turn to these books when we are troubled or confused.

But remember, we can only go forward when the cloud “lifts” or rises *above* the tabernacle and begins to move. As the tabernacle is a symbol for our whole mind with all its many aspects and degrees, it is important for us to understand that *our spiritual progress depends on a real elevation of our thought* – from static ideas of truth as mere knowledge or information to the living awareness of how it really affects us.

If the cloud of the literal sense of the Word does not move, we cannot move; it's as if we're in a fog. So we must camp, and wait, and simply do the tasks the Lord gives us to do as we go about our ordinary lives. But *when the cloud lifts* and we see the meaning of what the Lord reveals to us, we can go on. If we go by day it will be the truth accommodated to our understanding that leads us; if we go by night it will be the truth that shines from an awareness of the Lord's love that does so. Either way, though, the guidance is going to come from the Word, so our job is to be attentive to the Word, to know and understand it, and to be ready to respond to it at any time.

Day and night, cloud and fire: Let us pray that we may see Him always in the clouds of the literal sense, but with power and great glory through the meaning He has also revealed to us.

Amen.

Lessons: Exodus 12:31-33 & 13:17-22
Children's talk on the Pillar of Cloud and of Fire

Mark 13:3-8 & 19-27 [focus on v. 26]
Arcana Caelestia 8106 & 8108, selections