

'Behold, He Is Coming With Clouds'

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The Feast of Trumpets brings with it a confident hope and an energizing sense of anticipation. It foreshadows the return of Jesus Christ as King of kings, the resurrection from the dead, and the establishment of the government of God on earth. This annual Sabbath has been called *the* central, pivotal holy day because it looks forward to the most important events of this age.

In contrast to the day's significance, a relatively small number of scriptures describes the actual return and appearing of Jesus Christ. Even so, all of those scanty descriptions contain an important detail, one about which we rarely give any thought. Bible encyclopedias and topical studies barely give it a mention, yet for something as momentous as the return of the Messiah, every detail is relevant and significant.

Jesus' well-known Olivet Prophecy contains probably the most familiar description of Christ's return:

Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. (Matthew 24:30)

Other passages describing this event echo this common element:

- » I say to you, hereafter you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven. (Matthew 26:64)
- » Then they will see the Son of Man coming in the clouds with great power and glory. (Mark 13:26)
- » [Y]ou will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven. (Mark 14:62)
- » Then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. (Luke 21:27)
- » Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. (I Thessalonians 4:17)
- » Behold, He is coming with clouds, and every eye will see Him. (Revelation 1:7)

While some of these verses also speak of "power" and "glory," the common element in all these descriptions is the mention of *clouds*.

This detail at first may not seem relevant, but it shows up repeatedly, so we may wonder why God consistently inspired the Bible's writers to include that little detail. We know that He does not inspire

empty or superfluous words; everything about His revelation is deliberate and meaningful. What meaning do the clouds hold in the Bible? Why are they significant to the return of our Savior to the earth?

A Rainbow Set in the Cloud

The first time the Bible uses a word or concept frequently sets the stage for how God inspired the human writers to use it throughout the rest of His Word. Clouds are no exception. We find clouds first described immediately after the Flood:

And God said: “This is the sign of the covenant which I make between Me and you, and every living creature that is with you, for perpetual generations: I set My rainbow in the cloud, and it shall be for the sign of the covenant between Me and the earth. It shall be, when I bring a cloud over the earth, that the rainbow shall be seen in the cloud; and I will remember My covenant which is between Me and you and every living creature of all flesh; the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. The rainbow shall be in the cloud, and I will look on it to remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.” And God said to Noah, “This is the sign of the covenant which I have established between Me and all flesh that is on the earth.” (Genesis 9:12-17)

Here, clouds are linked to the sign of the rainbow and God’s everlasting promise that He will never again flood the earth. Today, we are far removed from the events of the Flood, so it may be difficult to grasp what it and its aftermath were like—every man, woman, and child dead, except Noah and his family. From the genealogies, we know that humanity had been on the earth about a millennia and a half, and before the Flood, people lived much longer lives and produced numerous children. Only God, and perhaps the angelic host, knows how many millions or billions of people that cataclysm destroyed.

God forcefully and deliberately ended that age. Yet, lest we think that all is hopeless and that another worldwide catastrophe could wipe out all life on the planet, God gives us this promise, repeating it several times: He will not destroy all flesh again.

Of course, we know from many verses that the end of this age will involve fire rather than another worldwide flood. But this does not nullify God’s promise. The point remains that God will not destroy all flesh by any means, whether by flood or by fire.

Genesis 9:12-17 indicates that the rainbow is the sign of that promise, but they also show that the setting and the context of that promise is the clouds. In the promise we see elements of God’s faithfulness, but the backdrop is God’s *mercy* in not destroying all of mankind.

“Clothed with a Cloud”

An interesting parallel to this appears in the book of Revelation. Genesis and Revelation mirror each other in many ways; frequently, when a matter is introduced in Genesis, it is resolved or concluded in some way in Revelation. As bookends of the Bible, they contain many of the same themes. Notice what John describes in Revelation 10:1:

I saw still another mighty angel coming down from heaven, clothed with a cloud. And a rainbow was on [H]is head, [H]is face was like the sun, and [H]is feet like pillars of fire.

Studying into this chapter makes plain that this Being is no mere angel, but it is in fact Jesus Christ. In the sequence of events, this chapter might be called “the beginning of the end” because it shows the mystery of God being finished and the point at which there would be no more delay in everything reaching its conclusion.

Here at the end, John’s vision pictures Jesus with a rainbow, showing that He has not forgotten His promise to mankind. Even as He is about to unleash tremendous destruction on rebellious humanity, the sign of His promise not to destroy everyone is literally at the top of His head. Notice that He is also clothed with a cloud. It is covering Him, allowing only the brightness of His face and the fiery brilliance of His feet to show.

To understand the significance of this cloud, consider what a cloud is and does. By way of definition, a *cloud* is “a visible mass of droplets of water or frozen crystals, suspended in the atmosphere.” Sometimes clouds bring rain, which can be either a blessing or a curse depending on the circumstances, but other times they pass by without sharing a drop. Nevertheless, there is one thing a cloud will always do, if it has any size at all: It will impede light, such as the light of the sun or the moon. Since it is clothing Jesus Christ, this cloud filters some of His breathtaking glorious radiance.

This is not the only way the Bible uses clouds. It also uses them to represent multitudes of people (Isaiah 60:8; Hebrews 12:1), the sins of men (Isaiah 44:22), or the impermanence of the wealth of the wicked (Hosea 6:4; 13:3). They can represent the empty words of false teachers (Jude 12; II Peter 2: 17), the unfulfilled promises of faithless men (Proverbs 25:14), and a number of other things. But when the clouds surround God Himself, they are a covering that mercifully impedes His full brilliance. They represent the unsearchableness of God, His mysterious depths, and how futile it is for carnal men to try to understand His ways (II Samuel 22:12; Psalm 97:2; Ezekiel 1:4).

This covering is critical because the undimmed brightness of a God-being is lethal to mankind. Moses had to be hidden from the full glory of God in the cleft of a rock, or he would have died (Exodus 33:19-23). After that, the Israelites could not stand to look at Moses’ face, and he had to use a veil—a cloud made of cloth, if you will—because even when the glory of God was reflected and vastly dimmed, it was too much to take (Exodus 34:29-35).

As already mentioned, Jesus Christ will be returning in glory, and that awesome glory has a terrible, lethal effect on sinful flesh. In particular, II Thessalonians 2:8 foretells that “the lawless one” will be “consume[d] with the breath of His mouth and destroy[ed] with the brightness of His coming.” Apparently, Christ will not always remain behind a cloud but will allow His full glory to show for the purpose of destroying unholy men.

“Unapproachable Light”

We can thus see why being surrounded by clouds is an act of mercy on God’s part: Mere men cannot abide the sight of One so pure and holy.

Near the end of Paul’s first epistle to Timothy, he mentions the return and appearance of Jesus Christ:

. . . which He will manifest in His own time, He who is the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, dwelling in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see, to whom be honor and everlasting power. Amen. (I Timothy 6:15-16)

Notice he writes that He dwells in “unapproachable light” and that no man can see Him. He implies that no man can see Him *and live*, not just that He is invisible. His goodness, purity, holiness, and character are so penetrating and absolute that they overwhelm anything made of weak, mortal flesh. So, when He deals with human beings, He clothes Himself with the clouds, allowing mankind to continue existing.

When God descended on Mount Sinai to make the covenant with Israel, the whole mountain was covered with clouds. God told Moses, “I am going to come to you in a dense cloud, so that the people will hear me speaking with you” (Exodus 19:9, *New International Version*). For the sake of Moses and the children of Israel, God let Himself be heard—which was terrifying enough (Hebrews 12:18-21)—but not seen.

The situation at Mount Sinai is reminiscent of the end of the book of Job, where he says, speaking figuratively, “I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees You” (Job 42:5). When the same book says that God answered Job out of the whirlwind (Job 38:1; 40:6), it does not speak of a little tornado. The word indicates a hurricane (*cf.* Psalm 55:8; 107:25-29; Isaiah 29:6; Jonah 1:4, 12)! God had wrapped Himself in a mighty storm, and seeing that tempest of clouds—along with spiritually seeing himself in relation to his Creator—caused Job to abhor himself and repent in dust and ashes. Undoubtedly, he was extremely grateful that the clouds were there!

As God led the Israelites through the wilderness, He remained in a cloud the whole way for their sakes. He dwelled with them—He tabernacled with them—but He had to do it in a way that would allow them to keep living. Such an allowance is just one thing that God does to make such a mismatched relationship work. Because who and what He is so overwhelms His creation, He is willing to confine Himself to clouds and thick darkness rather than allow His glory to radiate fully.

We Shall be Changed

At the time of the end, when God begins to intervene dramatically on earth, His glory will leave men scrambling in terror to get out of sight:

For the day of the Lord of hosts shall come upon everything proud and lofty, upon everything lifted up—and it shall be brought low. . . . The loftiness of man shall be bowed down, and the haughtiness of men shall be brought low; the Lord alone will be exalted in that day, but the idols He shall utterly abolish. They shall go into the holes of the rocks, and into the caves of the earth, from the terror of the Lord and the glory of His majesty, when He arises to shake the earth mightily. In that day a man will cast away his idols of silver and his idols of gold, which they made, each for himself to worship, to the moles and bats, to go into the clefts of the rocks, and into the crags of the rugged rocks, from the terror of the Lord and the glory of His majesty, when He arises to shake the earth mightily. (Isaiah 2:12, 17-21)

The people go seeking out blackness because, even when God is enveloped in thick clouds, as He is described elsewhere, His glory is still intensely uncomfortable to carnal man.

Even we who have been called and forgiven by God and who are taking on His spiritual image cannot literally stand in His presence. We who are mortal and corruptible must be given immortality and incorruptibility (I Corinthians 15:53; Romans 6:23). We must be resurrected or changed so that this relationship can continue once our temporary existence ends.

We must also be given new, spiritual bodies like His to complement the character He is creating in us (I Corinthians 15:42-49). We must be brought up to the God-level in order to know Him fully and to ensure that nothing comes between us—nothing that hinders us seeing Him as He is. We must go through a change so that the light in which He dwells is no longer unapproachable. Instead, this change will enable us to be part of that glorious light.

Notice how the apostle John describes this:

Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure. (I John 3: 2-3)

God will transform our lowly, mortal, corruptible bodies to be like His glorious body so that, when He is revealed, we can see Him without any hindrance or limitation. At this point, nothing will stand between us.

For those who are not changed at His appearing yet are judged worthy to live into the Millennium, He will still appear in clouds so He can continue to work with them without obliterating them with His glory. In God's mercy, He obscures Himself so that pitiful man is not erased in an instant, but He is working toward that day when all His children will see His face in full glory—and live.