

# Clouds (Part One): A Really Special Cloud

by Charles Whitaker

*Forerunner, "Prophecy Watch,"*

*“ God’s cloud led them on by day when they broke camp and set out.” ( Numbers 10:34, The Voice )*

One of the most nuanced yet telling dichotomies in God’s Word is that of concealment and revelation. Keeping something under one’s hat is the opposite of bringing it out into the open. The gambler who plays close to the vest is not likely to tip his hand. Anyone who is characteristically tight-lipped is not wont to spill the beans.

The tension between God’s keeping a secret and sharing it with others mirrors another basic dichotomy, His presence and His absence. God’s presence (or His messengers’) is revelatory, while His absence perpetuates the “mystery of godliness,” which the apostle Paul speaks about in I Timothy 3:16.<sup>i</sup>

This same apostle pointedly tells us one of the ways God reveals Himself. Anglican clergyman J.B. Phillips captures the spirit of Paul’s comments nicely:

Now the holy anger of God is disclosed from Heaven against the godlessness and evil of those men who render truth dumb and impotent by their wickedness. It is not that they do not know the truth about God; indeed he has made it quite plain to them. For since the beginning of the world the invisible attributes of God, e.g. his eternal power and deity, have been plainly discernible through things which he has made and which are commonly seen and known, thus leaving these men without a rag of excuse. They knew all the time that there is a God, yet they refused to acknowledge him as such, or to thank him for what he is or does. Thus they

became fatuous in their argumentations, and plunged their silly minds still further into the dark. (Romans 1:19-21, *The New Testament in Modern English*)

One of the design-characteristics of God's creation is its ability to reveal the power and divinity of its Creator. It does that so clearly, Paul emphasizes, that mankind has no excuse whatsoever to deny His existence. Whether these wicked individuals instruct about astronomy in an Ivy League university's lecture hall or write a book about theology, their arguments, Paul says, are fatuous—mindless and silly.

As part of God's creation, clouds teach us something about God's nature and His power. We can go as far as to call them a bespoke emblem—that is, a made-to-order symbol—for God's characteristic of hiding information from some and revealing it to others, according to His sovereign purpose. In these articles, we will look at clouds from both sides to see what they teach us about the presence and absence of God—His gracious willingness to reveal and His sovereign determination to conceal.

## **Not Your Everyday Cloud**

Of his Salvation, that is, of his God, David writes:

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. (Psalm 18:10-12, *English Standard Version*)

Note David's mention of "[H]is clouds." Numbers 10:34 refers to "the cloud of the LORD." The clouds God rides (compare Psalm 68:4) are unique for at least two awe-inspiring reasons.

First, unlike the rainy-day clouds we experience so often (scientifically, the colloidal aerosol made up predominately of water vapor), God's clouds issue "coals of fire" as well as moisture. God's clouds are supernatural. They are

in some ways *like* the clouds we know so well—the clouds that testify to God’s power and divinity—but in other ways astonishingly different.

Second and more importantly, God’s clouds reflect His glory. We might say God’s clouds are a lens focusing His glory. When God’s clouds are around, He is around! His clouds signal His presence.

One of the purposes to which God puts His clouds is to protect His people. The prophet Isaiah provides a good example. The setting of this place-of-safety prophecy is Jerusalem in the last days.

Then whoever is left in Zion and whoever remains in Jerusalem will be called holy, everyone who is recorded among the living in Jerusalem. The Lord will wash away the filth of Zion’s people. He will clean bloodstains from Jerusalem with a spirit of judgment and a spirit of burning. The Lord will create a cloud of smoke during the day and a glowing flame of fire during the night over the whole area of Mount Zion and over the assembly. His glory will cover everything. It will be a shelter from the heat during the day as well as a refuge and hiding place from storms and rain. (Isaiah 4:3-6, *God’s WORD Translation*)

What provides shelter, refuge, and a hiding place is not so much the “cloud of smoke” itself as it is the presence of God inside the cloud. The linkage of God’s glory to the cloud evidences His presence in it: The translators of the *Contemporary English Version* render verse 5, “God’s own glory will be like a huge tent that covers everything.” The *Good News Translation* has it, “God’s glory will cover and protect the whole city.”<sup>ii</sup>

Now, of course, there is no question about it: The phrase “a cloud of smoke during the day and a glowing flame of fire during the night” echoes the cloud and pillar of fire of the Exodus and the prolonged wilderness wanderings. Here is one of Scripture’s first references<sup>iii</sup> to them.<sup>iv</sup>

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. 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)

The meaning of this introductory passage about the pillar and cloud is clear: As He led the children of Israel, God was present in both pillar and cloud. The cloud supplied shade during the day, while the pillar provided light at night. The saga of the pillar and cloud continues in the next chapter. The context is the defeat of the Egyptians at the Red Sea.

And the Angel of God, who went before the camp of Israel, moved and went behind them; and the pillar of cloud went from before them and stood behind them. So it came between the camp of the Egyptians and the camp of Israel. Thus it was a cloud and 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. . . . Now it came to pass, in the morning watch, that the LORD looked down upon the army of the Egyptians through the pillar of fire and cloud, and He troubled the army of the Egyptians. (Exodus 14:19-20, 24)

The description of God looking down from the cloud clearly indicates His presence in it. In this case, His cloud expedites protection for His people and terrifies His enemies. God's cloud discomforts the Egyptians.

In Exodus 19, though, the idea of revelation through the cloud becomes explicit; God's cloud facilitates His revelation. He makes clear His intent: God tells Moses that He is coming in a cloud so that the children of Israel may *hear* when He speaks:

And the LORD said to Moses, "Behold, I come to you in the thick cloud, that the people may hear when I speak with you, and believe you forever." (Exodus 19:9)

A few verses later, Moses leads the people to God, that is, to meet Him. They come to be in His presence:

Then it came to pass on the third day, in the morning, that there were thunderings and lightnings, and a thick cloud on the mountain; and the sound of the trumpet was very loud, so that all

the people who were in the camp trembled. And Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai was completely in smoke, because the LORD descended upon it in fire. Its smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mountain quaked greatly. (Exodus 19:16-18)

## **Revealing and Concealing**

God's cloud, then, embodies a paradox. It can be a facility through which God reveals Himself, that is, a vehicle through which He communicates to mankind. Shortly before the Israelites entered the Promised Land, Moses reminds the people of the cloud's revelatory nature. It was God, he says, who for decades "went in the way before you to search out a place for you to pitch your tents, to show you the way you should go, in the fire by night and in the cloud by day" (Deuteronomy 1:33).

God's use of His cloud regarding the Tabernacle of Meeting provides another good example:

Moses took his tent and pitched it outside the camp, far from the camp, and called it the tabernacle of meeting. And it came to pass that everyone who sought the LORD went out to the tabernacle of meeting which was outside the camp. So it was, whenever Moses went out to the tabernacle, that all the people rose, and each man stood at his tent door and watched Moses until he had gone into the tabernacle. And it came to pass, when Moses entered the tabernacle, that the pillar of cloud descended and stood at the door of the tabernacle, and the LORD talked with Moses. All the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the tabernacle door, and all the people rose and worshiped, each man in his tent door. So the LORD spoke to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend.... (Exodus 33:7-11)

At the same time, however, the cloud allows God to cloak Himself—lest He let some cat or the other out of the bag. If we have eyes to understand it, God's refusing to reveal is actually a manifestation of His graciousness since information revealed too early would be harmful, even fatal. Keeping

information to Himself is an act of love on God's part. For instance, God uses the cloud to hide Himself from Moses, lest he see His face and die.

Then [God] said [to Moses], "I will make all My goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim the name of the LORD before you. I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion." But He said, "You cannot see My face; for no man shall see Me, and live." (Exodus 33:19-20)

The apostle John mentions a time, yet future, when God will reveal Himself to us, uncloaked:

Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God! Therefore the world does not know us, because it did not know Him. 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. (John 3:1-2)

It is God's choice as to how He uses His cloud. He is sovereign over the knowledge He reveals—and hides. Christ explained this divine prerogative to His disciples in Matthew 13:11, "He answered and said to them, "Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given." He again mentions the tension between revelation and concealment in Matthew 11:25, where He thanks His Father that He has "hidden these things from the wise and prudent and [has] revealed them to babes."

We learn of Him at His pleasure—through His grace. Paul alludes to this fact in II Timothy 3:7, mentioning there those who are "always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth." Study as we might, even with the best of intentions and the best of "learning aids," we come to understand only what God wills us to understand at the time.

Next time, we will focus on God's cloud as His means of transport over the face of the earth.

## End Notes

i Unless otherwise noted, all scriptural citations are from the *New King James Version*.

ii The *Message* is a bit coy, saying that the cloud and fire will “mark Mount Zion and everyone in it with His glorious presence . . .” The *New English Translation* is more direct: “. . . indeed a canopy will accompany the Lord’s glorious presence.” Wycliffe says, “. . . for His glory shall be a covering, or a defence [*sic*], for all.” Most other translations are mere obfuscations.

iii See also Exodus 10:21-23. The ninth plague, that of the terrible, tangible darkness experienced by the Egyptians (but not the children of Israel), may be a manifestation of God’s cloud, in this case to punish the Egyptians. God blinded them, sinners that they were, to His truth; they could not see Him even though He was present.

iv Other references to “the cloud of the LORD” (Numbers 10:34) appear in Numbers 9:15-23 and chapters 12, 14, and 16. For Deuteronomic references to the pillar and cloud, see Deuteronomy 1:33; 4:11; 5:22; and 31:15. Leviticus 16:2 refers to God’s appearing in a cloud above the Mercy Seat (in the Holy of Holies). Exodus 40:34-38 addresses the cloud’s filling the Tabernacle with God’s glory. For parallel references to the cloud at the time of the dedication of Solomon’s Temple, see I Kings 8:11-11 and II Chronicles 5:13-14. In all, there are about forty-two references to God’s cloud in the Pentateuch alone.