God's Comforting Presence
Exodus 13:17-22; Numbers 9:15-23 NKJV

Please turn with me in your Bibles to tonight's scripture text in **Exodus 13:17-22**

**Exodus 13:17-22 (NKJV)**

17 Then it came to pass, when Pharaoh had let the people go, that God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near; for God said, “Lest perhaps the people change their minds when they see war, and return to Egypt.”

18 So God led the people around by way of the wilderness of the Red Sea. And the children of Israel went up in orderly ranks out of the land of Egypt.

19 And Moses took the bones of Joseph with him, for he had placed the children of Israel under solemn oath, saying, “God will surely visit you, and you shall carry up my bones from here with you.”

20 So they took their journey from Succoth and camped in Etham at the edge of the wilderness

21 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.

22 He did not take away the pillar of cloud by day or the pillar of fire by night from before the people.

**PRAYER**
INTRODUCTION

When the Israelites made their exodus from Egypt under the leadership of Moses it was both an exciting time and yet a very fearful time.

It was exciting in the sense they were leaving behind a life of bondage and slavery in Egypt to pursue a whole new life of freedom in a land God had promised to their forefather Abraham over four hundred and thirty years earlier.

But it was a very fearful time for the Israelites in the sense they were on a journey to a place they had never been to before and they didn't know what dangers and troubles might await them from the time they left Egypt until they reached the Promised Land.

But it wasn't long after they departed on their journey that God manifested His glorious presence with the Israelites in a very powerful way in the form of “the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night.”

Pay careful attention to those first six words in VERSE 21 ........

“And the LORD went before them..........”

How powerful, how reassuring, how comforting is that! “And the LORD went before them?” God demonstrated His abiding presence with the Israelites by giving them 24-Hour-A-Day, “round-the-clock” proof He was there in the form of “the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire.”
When we think of “a pillar” we think of giant columns like those standing in front of the United States Capitol building. Think of “the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire” as giant columns extending from the earth to as far as the eye can see into the heavens above.

THE PILLAR OF CLOUD served to shield and protect the Israelites from the scorching desert sun. THE PILLAR OF FIRE gave them light to see..... and heat to keep them warm on those cold desert nights......and protection from the enemy.

But “the pillar of cloud and pillar of fire” served an even greater purpose. Turn with me to NUMBERS the ninth chapter, and let’s read VERSES 15-23.

a. The LORD went before them; what more can we ask for than this? God showed His presence to Israel in a dramatic way, by giving them “24-hour-a-day” assurance, with a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.

Numbers 9:15-23 (NKJV)

15 Now on the day that the tabernacle was raised up, the cloud covered the tabernacle, the tent of the Testimony; from evening until morning it was above the tabernacle like the appearance of fire.

16 So it was always: the cloud covered it by day, and the appearance of fire by night.

17 Whenever the cloud was taken up from above the tabernacle, after that the children of Israel would journey; and in the place where the cloud settled, there the children of Israel would pitch their tents.

18 At the command of the LORD the children of Israel would journey, and at the command of the LORD they would camp; as long as the cloud stayed above the tabernacle they remained encamped.
19 Even when the cloud continued long, many days above the tabernacle, the children of Israel kept the charge of the Lord and did not journey. when the cloud was above the tabernacle a few days: according to the command of the Lord they would remain encamped, and according to the command of the Lord they would journey.

20 So it was, when the cloud was taken up in the morning, then they would remain encamped, and they would journey. when the cloud was taken up, they would journey.

21 So it was, when the cloud remained only from evening until morning: when the cloud was taken up in the morning, then they would journey; whether by day or by night, whenever the cloud was taken up, they would journey.

22 Whether it was two days, a month, or a year that the cloud remained above the tabernacle, the children of Israel would journey; but when it was taken up, they would journey.

23 At the command of the Lord they remained encamped, and at the command of the Lord they journeyed; they kept the charge of the Lord, at the command of the Lord by the hand of Moses.

The Pillar of Cloud and The Pillar of Fire served as God's STOP LIGHTS in the wilderness.

When God moved the cloud that was "THE GREEN LIGHT" for the Israelites to proceed forward and follow the cloud wherever God led. When the cloud remained stationary that was "the RED LIGHT" for the Israelites to stop.
The scriptures record 50 "start and stop" movements of the "pillar of cloud and fire." Some of those movements were as short as a few days in between, while the longest stop was at Mt. Sinai for eleven months and five days.

Now this brings up some interesting questions:

*Why so many "stops" along the way?

*Why did God lead the Israelites on a route filled with lots of twists and turns and going around in circles? (Look at a map of the Exodus route and you'll see what I mean!)

*Why didn't God lead them on the STRAIGHTEST and SHORTEST ROUTE to the Promised Land?

God had a divine purpose for mapping out their journey the way He did.

We must remember that when the ISRAELITES came out of Egypt they numbered between 2-3 MILLION. They had no HOMELAND. They had no LAWS. They had no GOVERNMENT. They were totally DISORGANIZED as a people.

GOD needed time to teach the Israelites to TRUST in Him completely. God also needed time to teach the Israelites how to WORSHIP Him. The Israelites had not learned how to truly worship God while they were in Egypt. They had been exposed to many of the "false gods" of the Egyptians. God needed time to "de-program" them and teach them to worship THE ONE TRUE GOD, JEHOVAH.
GOD needed time to teach the Israelites to DEPEND on Him for their daily PROVISIONS and even their very EXISTENCE. And what better way to do that than to lead them out into the middle of an desolate, barren wilderness?

GOD also needed time to get them organized into a nation, and He did that during that eleven month, five day stop at Mt. Sinai. It was there the Israelites were divided into the twelve tribes, and tribal leaders were appointed. It was also at Mt. Sinai God gave Moses the Laws that would not only form the foundation of Israel’s government, but give them the foundation on how to build their relationship with GOD and with one another.

And so “the pillar of cloud and pillar of fire” would move and then it would stop. It would move and then it would stop. When the Israelites learned the lesson God was trying to teach them, God would move them on to the next classroom.

The Pillar of Cloud and the Pillar of Fire were a continual source of COMFORT and GUIDANCE for the Israelites all along their journey!
APPLICATION

Like the Israelites of old, you and I are on a journey to “our Promised Land,” our eternal home in heaven. And like the Israelites of old, God has many lessons He wants to teach us all along our journey.

Wouldn’t it be great if God were to give us “A pillar of cloud to guide us by day and a pillar of cloud to protect us at night?”

I mean think about it! If you looked out your front window each day and saw “the cloud of God’s Holy presence” wouldn’t it comfort you to know that God was there to lead you every step of the way? And wouldn’t it be great every time you had a major decision to make in life all you had to do was “follow the cloud?”

And imagine how comforting it would be to look out your window each night before you go to bed and see “the pillar of fire” assuring you that you can rest peacefully because God’s presence is there to protect you.

That would be wonderful wouldn’t it, to have our own “pillar of cloud and pillar of fire” to comfort and guide us? What if I told you GOD HAS GIVEN US SOMETHING FAR GREATER?
Hebrews 8:5 (NKJV) speaks of the things of the Old Testament, the things pertaining to “The Law” as “serving as a copy and shadow of the heavenly things.”

For example, the Holy of Holies in the Tabernacle and later the Temple served as a foreshadow of Heaven itself. The Law with its requirements for “sacrifices” foreshadowed Christ being offered as “the sacrificial lamb” for the sins of the world. The crossing of the Red Sea foreshadowed our Christian baptism, the leaving behind of the old life of slavery to begin a new life of freedom in Christ; the Table of Shewbread served as a foreshadow of the Lord's Supper. The Lampstand served as a foreshadow of the Lord's Church. And so on and so forth.

So what did “the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night” foreshadow? They served as a foreshadow of God's Holy Spirit, God's comforting and guiding presence within us.

Let me share with you just some of the beautiful similarities between the presence of “the pillar of cloud and fire” that accompanied the Israelites on their journey to the Promised Land and the Holy Spirit who accompanies us on our journey to our Promised Land, heaven.
(A) **THE CLOUD** was God's gracious gift to Israel. There is no indication at all in the scriptures that the people ever asked for the cloud. Likewise the Holy Spirit is God's gracious gift to us. Jesus said in JOHN 14:16,17a “And I will the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with You forever----the Spirit of truth.”

(B) **THE CLOUD** was a source of great comfort to Israel. Likewise the Holy Spirit is a great source of comfort to you and me. Jesus said in JOHN 14:26 “But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, (some translations say “Comforter.”) whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things I said to you.”

(C) **THE CLOUD** was a source of guidance for the Israelites. When the cloud moved they moved. When the cloud didn't move, they didn't move. Likewise the Holy Spirit guides us. Jesus said in JOHN 16:13 (NKJV) “However when He, the Spirit of Truth, has come, HE WILL GUIDE YOU INTO ALL TRUTH; for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come.”

**CONCLUSION**
As we bring this message to a close, I would like to share something with you from “Streams In The Desert.” In fact, the Lord used this devotion for November 1st to inspire this message I have shared with you this evening. 

When the cloud remained, the Israelites did not set out. This was the ultimate test of obedience. It was relatively easy to fold up their tents when the fleecy cloud slowly gathered over the tabernacle and began to majestically float ahead of the multitude of the Israelites.

Change normally seems pleasant, and the people were excited and interested in the route, the scenery, and the habitat of the next stopping place. Yet having to wait was another story altogether. “When the cloud remained” however uninviting and sweltering the location, however trying to flesh and blood, however boring and wearisome to those who were impatient, however perilously close their exposure to danger, THERE WAS NO OPTION BUT TO REMAIN ENCAMPED.

The Psalmist said, “I waited patiently for the LORD; He turned to me and heard my cry.” (Ps.40:1) And what God did for the Old Testament saints, He will do for believers down through the ages, yet He will often keep us waiting.

When God sends no answer and “the cloud remains,” WE MUST WAIT! Yet we can do so with the full assurance of God’s provision of manna...... water from the rock.......shelter.......and protection from the enemy. He never keeps us at our post without assuring us of His presence or sending His daily supplies.

Brothers and sisters may we learn to patiently wait on the Lord. May we learn to trust completely in the Spirit’s leading, for He is our “pillar of cloud and fire!”