

The Glory Cloud

Exodus 40:34

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May 21, 2003

Exodus, chapter 40...this is a fun section, though. This is a glorious section of Exodus 40. It's almost as if the Lord's rewarding you at the end of those long tedious descriptions from Exodus 35-39, and really into the middle of chapter 40, with this glorious spectacle.

In Exodus 40 we have a view of the completion of the tabernacle, and of its consecration into the Lord's service, and in verses 1-15, the last time we were together we saw that there we have a detailed set of divine instructions for how to set up the tabernacle; and then, in verses 16-33, we have a detailed description of the carrying out of those instructions for the setting up of the tabernacle; and that phrase "...*just as the Lord commanded Moses*" or its equivalent is repeated no less than eight times, just in that section, and once again it shows to us the importance of worshipping God, God's way.

And that brings us to these very last words of Exodus, our ninety-fifth sermon on the book.

So turn with me in your Bibles, and look with me at God's word in Exodus 40:34:

Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. And Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud had settled on it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. And throughout all their journeys whenever the cloud was taken up from over the tabernacle, the sons of Israel would set out; but if the cloud was not taken up, then they did not set up until the day when it was taken up. For throughout all their journeys, the cloud of the Lord was on the tabernacle by day, and there was fire in it by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel.

Amen. This is God's word. May He add His blessing to it. Let's pray.

Lord God, we do thank You for this word. We bless You for it. We bless You for every word of Your word. And we bless You, O God, for the challenge that it is sometimes for us to understand it. And tonight we bless You for the glory of this

passage and the hope that it holds out to us. Help us to understand it. By Your Spirit, apply it to our own hearts, our own lives, our own situations. Help us, we pray. Change us by it, encourage us with it. Grant us hope through it. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Now in these closing words of Exodus, two twin themes are evident — that is, two different sets of themes. First of all you see the theme of God's awesome majesty, that He's high and lifted up; and then, side by side with it, the theme of His nearness. He's high and He's lifted up, He's majestic, He's transcendent, but He's near to His people. He's imminent, He's close to them. He's present with them, and you see those things set side by side. And in connection with that second part of the first twin theme that He's near to His people, as the passage describes to us the way that God is near to His people, you see another set of twin themes, and that is God's favor. He's near His people. The fact that He's at the tabernacle in this way is showing His favor towards His people. He's approving what they've done. They've done the building of the tabernacle, the setting up of the tabernacle, just like He told them to do, and His presence there is a tangible sign that God is saying to His people 'I accept what you have done. I receive your offering. I'm dwelling in your midst.'

But it's not only a sign of favor and approval, it is a sign of His protection to them. And you'll see these themes as we work through the passage. There are several important things to have our attention drawn to. I want to point out three or four tonight as we look at the passage.

First, look at verse 34, because in that verse you see the spectacular manifestation of the Lord's presence with His people in the radiance of His divine splendor, as the glory cloud comes down upon the tabernacle, the tent. And again, this very spectacle is a jarring display of the contrast between God's divine transcendence and His condescension: that He dwells high and lifted up and exalted, and yet He dwells near to His people.

He condescends to come near to His people. Let me just ask you to think of it one more time: God manifests Himself in a tent! Friends, it's the size of this room, roughly! The glorious, singular manifestation of the God who spoke the entire universe into being — manifesting Himself in a cloth structure the size of this room! The condescension of God is manifest in that very thing. You don't even have to take one step beyond that reality, that God chooses as the place of His manifestation this tent that's going to be moving through the desert.

The Lord's glory cloud is what is called a *theophany*. That's what the theologians call it, by putting two words together than mean a manifestation of God. A *theophany* just means a visible manifestation of the presence of the invisible God. No man has ever seen God, He tells us in His word, and yet He manifests Himself from time to time in visible ways in order to make certain points to His people.

Moses, you remember, He has spoken to out of the burning bush. That's not what God looks like, but He manifested Himself to Moses in that visible way. And here in the glory cloud He's manifesting Himself to His people.

Sometimes He manifests Himself in this way to instruct; in other times, He manifests Himself in this way to assure. And I want you to look at verse 34 and notice the parallel — it helps you to understand that something is going on. Notice the word: “The *cloud* covered the tent of meeting”; and then, look at the second half of the sentence: “And the *glory* of the Lord filled the tabernacle.” Now, you've already seen in your study that *tent of meeting* and *tabernacle* are two alternative phrases used to describe the same structure, and you see in this sentence how they're paralleled. “The cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle” — so, the *cloud* parallels what? The glory of the Lord. And so the glory of the Lord is visibly manifested — how? In this wondrous, this supernatural cloud. That's why we call it *the glory cloud*. It's a visible manifestation of the invisible God, and in this context the cloud of glory signifies both God's approving favor — that is, His acknowledgement that Israel had faithfully done exactly what He had told Israel to do in the construction of the tabernacle. They had been unfaithful in the incident of the golden calf, and the fact that He's drawing near and filling this tent, this house, is a visible sign that ‘Now you did it just like I said, and look what I'm going to do! You built that golden calf because you wanted to experience the nearness of God, and you know what it cost you? It almost cost you the nearness of God. And now you've done it the way I told you to do it, and you know what's going to happen as a result? You are going to experience the nearness of God.’

And so His approval is being shown as He draws near in this visible manifestation in the glory cloud.

The fact that the cloud covers the tabernacle upon its completion is a display of God's approval of Moses' and the people's work. He shows His favor. But it also shows His protection, and this is pointed out in verse 38. Sneak a peek ahead of time to where it says:

“Throughout their journeys, the cloud of the Lord was on the tabernacle, and there was fire in it by night in the sight of all the house of the Lord.”

It's a visible reminder: ‘I'm here. I'm here, My people. I'm right in the midst of you; right in the midst of all your problems. I'm in the midst of all your trials. I'm not ‘out there’ somewhere, I'm right here in the middle of it. I'm in the thick of it with you, and what you're going through, I'm in the thick of it with you, and I'm protecting you, and I'm guarding you, and I'm guiding you.’

In other words, the glory cloud is a visible manifestation of the constant presence of God. He is constantly present in His divine providence. And there's a

staggering humility to what God is doing here. He's condescending to dwell in this tent with Israel.

If you'll remember the story in II Samuel 7, God parses exactly what He's doing. He explains exactly what He's doing. David, you remember, now dwells in a palace of cedar in Jerusalem, and the ark is in the process of being moved up to Jerusalem, and then it's housed in the tabernacle. And David is a humble man, and he looks at his palace and he looks at the tent, and he says 'You know, my house is bigger than God's house.' And he says 'My house is nicer than God's house.' And David draws the right deduction: 'That's wrong! My house shouldn't be nicer than God's house!' And so he says 'Nathan, I want to build a house for God.' And you remember Nathan's original response is 'That's good, David. The Lord's with you. That's good. You go do it.' And that night the Lord comes to Nathan in a dream, and He tells him 'Now you go right back to David and you tell David, 'David, has there ever been a time with the children of Israel when I haven't dwelt in a tent? And has there ever been a time when I asked them to build Me a palace?'

You see what God is saying: 'As long as My people were in tents, I'm going to be there with them. My people are in the wilderness...if they're nomads, if they're people without a rooted place, that's where I'm going to be with them.' You see, God's explaining. He's explaining to you there this glorious condescension of His indwelling and manifesting Himself in this tent. He draws near and He lives among His people. That's the kind of God He is. You see it in the tent, the tabernacle; you see it in Jesus, whom John says in John 1 *tabernacled among us*. He came and He dwelt among us. And you see it in the Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit is poured out and tabernacles in us, and in the gathered people of God.

That's how God works. One scholar says the tabernacle was to function like a portable Sinai. You know, at Sinai, God had manifested His presence in a spectacular way, and what is the tabernacle? It's a miniature, portable Sinai. That's what it was: a constant reminder to God's people that God is there. And I want to say to you, friends, that the nearness of God is one of the great covenant blessings and promises that we enjoy.

You know, there's a story (I won't reveal the characters)...there's a story of a seminary student who was asked by one of his very well-known professors — none, by the way, of those professors are in this room tonight. None in this room are former professors who were involved in this. This is a story I know about, and I won't even admit at what seminary it happened. But the professor asked the student to open the class in prayer, and the student opened in prayer with these words or something to the effect, "Lord, be with us today." At the end of the prayer the professor begins to dissect the student's prayer and say, "Now, I assume then that you are denying the doctrine of the omnipresence of God, because you asked Him to be with us. Well, if God is everywhere, He's already

with us!” But you know, “Be near us, be with us, O God” is a profoundly biblical prayer, because it represents this plea: “O God, accept us and protect us. Lord, be near me. Accept me and protect me.”

That's exactly what God, you see, was saying in the tabernacle: ‘I accept you, and I will protect you.’ And so when the little child sings, when you sing that third stanza of *Away in a Manger*:

“Be near me, Lord Jesus, I ask Thee to stay
Close by me forever, and love me, I pray.
Bless all the dear children in Thy tender care,
And fit us for heaven, to live with Thee there”

— you’re praying a profoundly biblical prayer. You’re praying a tabernacle prayer! “God, be near me. God, draw near me; accept me; protect me.”

And you know, the condescension goes on, doesn't it? We'll see that when we look at verse 35. Turn with me to verse 35, then, in chapter 40. Here we see the awesome exalted eternal God draw near, and when the awesome eternal God draws near, not even Moses can go in the tabernacle. Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud had settled on it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. And here's a tongue twister for you, a mind twister: God is transcendent in His imminence, and imminent in His transcendence.

Now, in English! God is high and exalted in His nearness, and He is near in His high and exaltedness.

The glory of the Lord fills the tabernacle, and what we see when that glory cloud comes upon it is the revelation of God's transcendent majesty. It's so overwhelming that not even Moses, who alone among the elders of Israel had drawn near to God in times past, not even Moses can enter into the place of His presence, and it's a classic representation of the doctrine of God's transcendence. He's so exalted, He's so high and lifted up, He cannot be experienced directly in His fullness by mortal man. You remember Exodus 33:20 had expressed that idea in these words: “Man shall not see Me and live!” You know, Moses had said, “Lord, let me see Your glory.” “Man shall not see Me and live, Moses.” And now that glory is coming down, and even Moses can't enter into the tabernacle as the glory of the Lord indwells it.

You see, Moses is reminding us again there of our need of a mediator if we are to experience communion with the High and Holy One, but this passage reminds us that when God draws near, it is the transcendent God and no other, who draws near. That's why — remember the Christmas story: “And the glory of the Lord shone round about them” [you still remember it in the King James, don't you?] “And the glory of the Lord shone round about them, and they were...” happy? “They were sore afraid.” That's what happens when the transcendent

God draws near. He is high and exalted in His nearness, and the result is apart from Him calming grace, we are terrified; and yet, He is near to us in His high and exaltedness.

You remember what Isaiah 57:15 says?

“Thus says the High and Exalted One, who lives forever, whose name is holy: I dwell on a high and holy place....”

and one other place. Where?

“And also with the contrite and lowly of heart.”

Do you see what God is saying? He's saying ‘I am the high and exalted God, and I am near to My people in their lowliness, their contriteness, their repentance, their humiliation, their trials, their weakness.’ Power perfected in weakness — ‘I'm near to you in My high and exaltedness.’

A third thing: Look at verses 36-38. It's the transcendent God, it's that high and exalted God who guides and protects us. The divine manifestation of God at the tabernacle and the tabernacle's placement in the camp is to be an on-going reminder of God's providential protection. Even as the *Shekinah* glory reminds us of God's transcendence, it points to the blessing of His presence.

That same cloud that sets forth God's majesty also sets forth His continual caring presence among His wandering people throughout their years in the wilderness. And these final three verses of Exodus stress that the Lord led and guarded His people by His cloud of presence:

“Throughout all their journeys, the cloud of the Lord was on the tabernacle by day, and there was fire in it by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel.”

And the same is true today, even though God doesn't manifest Himself in the same way He did at Sinai. The Lord guides and defends His people by the indwelling of His glorious Holy Spirit, leading us into the truth by His word and providing us with Spiritual armor (capital “S”) against sin.

Now this Book of Exodus, which started with the story of misery and oppression - the people of God in misery and oppression, ends on this glorious note. Israel is assured that night and day the God of the universe is hovering around her to protect her, to guide her, to defend her, to aid her, to control her future.

Bette Midler sang a few years ago, “God is watching us, from a distance.” And God is saying through Moses at the tabernacle, ‘Oh, no. I am in the midst of it with you. I'm right in the middle of your mess.’ There's no distance here. The High and Exalted One has come down in the middle of your experience, in your

difficulties, in your weaknesses, in your sins, and He's not just right up against you, He's inside of you! That's how close He is!

We just sang about it, didn't we? It's right back there. Look at 345, and look at that third stanza. Look at how Newton turns this into a new covenant concept for you:

“Round each habitation” — he's talking about Zion, the church of the living God. It's not just a tabernacle now: Around each habitation...it's almost like every household in the kingdom of God...

“Round each habitation, hovering,
See the cloud and fire appear
For a glory and a covering,
Showing that the Lord is near.

“Thus deriving from their banner,
Light by night and shade by day,
Safe, they feed...[who? The people of God, those who have trusted in Him, those who are trusting in Jesus Christ]...
Safe, they feed upon the manna
Which He gives them when they pray.”

Now God is right in the middle of our mess, surrounding, hovering over each habitation. We need a gracious, loving, almighty God near to guide us and to protect us, and that's why the Williams's wrote this hymn:

Guide me, O Thou great Jehovah,
Pilgrim through this barren land.
I am weak, but Thou art mighty;
Hold me with Thy powerful hand.
Bread of Heaven, Bread of Heaven,
Feed me till I want no more;
Feed me till I want no more.

Open now the crystal fountain,
Whence the healing stream doth flow.
Let the fire and cloudy pillar
Lead me all my journey through.
Strong Deliverer, Strong Deliverer,
Be Thou still my strength and shield;
Be Thou still my strength and shield.

When I tread the verge of Jordan,
Bid my anxious fears subside.
Death of death, and hell's destruction,

Land me safe on Canaan's side.
Songs of praises, songs of praises,
I will ever give to Thee;
I will ever give to Thee.

God is near us, and He reminds us of that in the tabernacle.

One last thing: The tabernacle serves as the place of God's presence. The tabernacle serves as the place where He manifests His presence to Israel. It's the place where Israel experiences the presence of God.

Now let me ask you something, new covenant believer: Where is the special place that you experience the presence of God? Where is that place where you experience that special nearness of God? All of us could give testimony tonight, I trust, of times in which God was so near to us in our aid that it was as if we could have reached out and touched Him. But you know, Jesus says because you are the tabernacle, because you are the temple, that the place where you know the nearness of the presence of God, where you experience the nearness of the presence of God in a way that it is experienced nowhere else is ...where? "Where two or three are gathered together in My name." When the body of Christ, when the temple of God is gathered in that corporate worship, that is the place where the new covenant believer experiences the special presence of God. That's why Paul can remind you in Ephesians 2:21 that He's building you into a temple, and Jesus can tell you in Matthew 18:20 that 'I am there with you in a unique way when you are gathered in My name.'

And you may be saying to yourself, "But I haven't seen any cloud and fire recently." You may not have, but Jesus...Jesus has promised to draw near to you when you're gathered with His people and gathered in His name. Take Him up on it. Let's pray.

Lord God, we need You. We love You. We adore You. We acknowledge that You are high and lifted up, and to our everlasting consternation and delight we also acknowledge that You have drawn so near as to occupy the very foundations of our soul, in Jesus Christ. Grant us to live in light of that reality. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Would you stand for God's blessing.

Grace to you, and peace, from God the Father and our Lord Jesus, the Messiah. Amen.

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