

Title: **WHEN GOD ISN'T THERE**

Text: Exodus 14:19-20

Subject: *Christ Hiding Himself*

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Tape: Exodus #67

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Introduction:

When the children of Israel came out of Egypt, as they approached the edge of the wilderness, the Lord God gave them a visible token of his presence, by which he would lead and protect them throughout their sojourn through the wilderness (13:20-22).

(Exodus 13:20-22) “And they took their journey from Succoth, and encamped in Etham, in the edge of the wilderness. (21) And the LORD went before them by day in a pillar of a cloud, to lead them the way; and by night in a pillar of fire, to give them light; to go by day and night: (22) He took not away the pillar of the cloud by day, nor the pillar of fire by night, *from* before the people.”

CHRIST'S PRESENCE

They saw in the sky above them a pillar of cloud. At night became a flame of fire. This was not something that looked like a cloud during the day, and looked like a column of fire at night, something that appeared to be guiding and protecting them. This was a supernatural thing. God gave it; and it never departed from his chosen, so long as they walked through the wilderness. But, great as the symbol was, the reality was greater. That pillar that protected them and led them not just a symbol of Christ's presence, — that pillar was the Lord Jesus Christ himself, their God and Savior, who had long before sworn, “*I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee.*”

“*He spake unto them in the cloudy pillar*” (Psalm 99:7). Wherever the cloud went, Israel followed. It was their constant companion, their conductor, lest they go astray. The cloud was a huge umbrella, covering the whole of the great congregation, protecting them from the burning heat of the desert by day. At night, it was a clear, bright and shining light. The children of Israel could as easily march through the wilderness at night as they could during the day. Well might they sing, as David did in Psalm 84:11, “*The Lord God is a sun and shield!*” They experienced the fulfillment of the promise given

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many years later, “*The sun shall not smite thee by day, nor the moon by night*” (Psalm 121:6).

This blessed symbol of God’s presence must have been a very great joy and comfort. It must have been a glorious sight. Every man, woman and child in Israel (millions of them!) could see it floating above them as the constant, abiding banner of Jehovah’s love, approval and tender care. — Moses declares, “*He took not away the pillar of the cloud by day, nor the pillar of fire by night, from before the people.*”

My point is just this. I want you to see this and understand it. — **The Lord Jesus Christ, our God and Savior is always with us.** He has promised, “*I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee.*” In the night of sorrow and in the day of joy, he is with us. But we do not always perceive his presence. We do not always enjoy it. He never leaves us, but we sometimes think he has. The sun always shines; but when the earth turns, or clouds gather in the sky, we cannot see the shining sun. Sometimes, he who is the glory of Israel removes the manifestation of his presence and stands, as it were, behind us and not before us, and we are greatly troubled because of his absence. That is my subject tonight: — **WHEN GOD ISN'T THERE.** Then we cry, with Job, “*Oh that I knew where I might find him! that I might come even to his seat!*”

Proposition: But even then, he the Lord God seems to have utterly forsaken us, he is with us, fighting for us, saving us and doing us good. — That is the message of our text...

(Exodus 14:19-20) “And the angel of God, which went before the camp of Israel, removed and went behind them; and the pillar of the cloud went from before their face, and stood behind them: (20) And it came between the camp of the Egyptians and the camp of Israel; and it was a cloud and darkness *to them*, but it gave light by night *to these*: so that the one came not near the other all the night.”

There are two passages in Isaiah’s prophecy very similar to this (Isaiah 52:9-12; 58:8-14).

(Isaiah 52:9-12) “Break forth into joy, sing together, ye waste places of Jerusalem: for the LORD hath comforted his people, he hath redeemed Jerusalem. (10) The LORD hath made bare his holy

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arm in the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God. (11) Depart ye, depart ye, go ye out from thence, touch no unclean *thing*; go ye out of the midst of her; be ye clean, that bear the vessels of the LORD. (12) For ye shall not go out with haste, nor go by flight: for the LORD will go before you; and the God of Israel *will be* your rereward.”

That word, “rereward,” is “rearward.” It means “rear guard” or “towards the rear.” The Lord God of Israel is sometimes out of sight, behind us; but he is still the Lord God of Israel who is fighting for us. Look at Isaiah 58:8-14.

(Isaiah 58:8-14) “Then shall thy light break forth as the morning, and thine health shall spring forth speedily: and thy righteousness shall go before thee; the glory of the LORD shall be thy rereward. (9) Then shalt thou call, and the LORD shall answer; thou shalt cry, and he shall say, Here I *am*... — ... (11) And the LORD shall guide thee continually, and satisfy thy soul in drought, and make fat thy bones: and thou shalt be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water, whose waters fail not... — ... (13) If thou turn away thy foot from the sabbath, *from* doing thy pleasure on my holy day; and call the sabbath a delight, the holy of the LORD, honourable; and shalt honour him, not doing thine own ways, nor finding thine own pleasure, nor speaking *thine own* words: (14) Then shalt thou delight thyself in the LORD; and I will cause thee to ride upon the high places of the earth, and feed thee with the heritage of Jacob thy father: for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken *it*.”

The Lord’s manifest presence is our great joy; but his absence is our misery. If God smiles, none can make me miserable; but when he hides his smiling face none can give me joy. Still, though we see neither the cloud by day nor the flame by night, God our Savior is with us, fighting for us, and saving us. Look at one more passage in Isaiah (54:7-17).

(Isaiah 54:7-17) “For a small moment have I forsaken thee; but with great mercies will I gather thee. (8) In a little wrath I hid my face from thee for a moment; but with everlasting kindness will I have mercy on thee, saith the LORD thy Redeemer. (9) For this *is as* the waters of Noah unto me: for *as* I have sworn that the waters of Noah should no more go over the earth; so have I sworn that I would not

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be wroth with thee, nor rebuke thee. (10) For the mountains shall depart, and the hills be removed; but my kindness shall not depart from thee, neither shall the covenant of my peace be removed, saith the LORD that hath mercy on thee. (11) O thou afflicted, tossed with tempest, *and* not comforted, behold, I will lay thy stones with fair colours, and lay thy foundations with sapphires. (12) And I will make thy windows of agates, and thy gates of carbuncles, and all thy borders of pleasant stones. (13) And all thy children *shall be* taught of the LORD; and great *shall be* the peace of thy children. (14) In righteousness shalt thou be established: thou shalt be far from oppression; for thou shalt not fear: and from terror; for it shall not come near thee. (15) Behold, they shall surely gather together, *but* not by me: whosoever shall gather together against thee shall fall for thy sake. (16) Behold, I have created the smith that bloweth the coals in the fire, and that bringeth forth an instrument for his work; and I have created the waster to destroy. (17) No weapon that is formed against thee shall prosper; and every tongue *that* shall rise against thee in judgment thou shalt condemn. This *is* the heritage of the servants of the LORD, and their righteousness *is* of me, saith the LORD.”

PRESENCE REMOVED

Give me your attention for just a few minutes. I've got something that will help you to understand the Lord's way with our souls. **Sometimes he mysteriously removes himself from before us.** — Moses tells us, “*The angel of God, which went before the camp of Israel, removed and went behind them*” (v. 19). The symbol of God's presence was removed from before Israel, just as the fearful Israelites could feel the hot breath of Pharaoh's chariot horses breathing down their necks. From the day they entered the desert, they had seen the fiery, cloudy pillar before them. Now, suddenly, it gone! As they obeyed God's command to “*go forward,*” as they neared the raging sea, they looked forward, but saw nothing!

So it is with us at times. Sometimes the Lord our God hides himself from us, takes away his manifest presence, and refuses to show himself. Sometimes, as we walk in the light of God's countenance, enjoying sweet fellowship with Christ our Redeemer, bathing in the consolation of the Spirit, suddenly, we look up and see nothing but darkness before us. Like the spouse, we cry, “*I sought him, but I found him not.*” Everything seemed

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bright and cheerful. We expected to go on from strength to strength, from victory to victory, until we came to the mount of God, to dwell forever in his rest. Then, darkness, sudden darkness, nothing but darkness! Then, nothing seems sure. Clouds return. Fears assail. And we cry, "*Oh that I knew where I might find him!*" As Newton expressed it, we start to look within, and cry with tears...

'Tis a point I long to know,
Oft it causes anxious thought: —
Do I love the Lord, or no?
Am I His, or am I not?

If I love, why am I this;
Why this dull, this lifeless frame?
Hardly, sure, can they be worse,
Who have never heard His name.

Could my heart so hard remain,
Prayer a task and burden prove;
Every trifle give me pain,
If I knew a Savior's love?

When I turn my eyes within,
All is dark and vain, and wild;
Filled with unbelief and sin,
Can I deem myself a child?

If I pray, or hear, or read,
Sin is mixed with all I do;
You that love the Lord indeed,
Tell me, is it thus with you?"

God's promise seems to fall to the ground. Our circumstances seem to contradict it. Our hearts sink to the depths, crying, "*if the foundations be destroyed, what can the righteous do?*" We begin to call into question the very Word of God, which once caused us to hope! We have said, "*This God is our God for ever and ever: he will be our guide even unto death!*" But when he withdraws from before us, nothing seems sure. We begin to think, "*Is his mercy clean gone for ever? Doth his promise fail for evermore?*" In

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our souls, we cry, *“My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? why art thou so far from helping me, and from the words of my roaring? O my God, I cry in the daytime, but thou hearest not!”*

Do you know what I am talking about? I know some of you do. The trouble may be caused by outward trials, personal faults, or inward corruption. That was David’s case when he kept silence and refused to confess his sin.

- You try to read God’s Word; but it is empty.
- You try to pray; but the heavens are brass!
- You come here to hear a word from heaven; but hear only the sound of my voice!
- There’s no light, but only thick darkness before you!

What are we to do in such circumstances? The very worst thing to do is what we are most prone to do. — Don’t turn your eyes within! Look out of yourself to God on his throne! That is what he tells us to do (Isaiah 50:10).

(Isaiah 50:10) “Who *is* among you that feareth the LORD, that obeyeth the voice of his servant, that walketh *in* darkness, and hath no light? let him trust in the name of the LORD, and stay upon his God.”

The Israelites were in a time of dark necessity. Never did they more need the light of God’s presence. But just at the time of their greatest need, he removed himself and went behind them! Why? — They must have thought, “The Lord has forsaken us to punish us for our murmuring and unbelief.” But that was not the case. The fact is **our God often sends his messengers of love on a black horse of trouble and sorrow**. For the believer, darkness of soul is not the result of God’s anger, but the fruit of his love. It is intended to do us good.

- To teach us patience!
- To prove our faith!
- To destroy self-confidence!
- To make us seek him!
- To excite our desires!
- To make us tender and sympathetic toward others when they walk in darkness!

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When the cloudy and fiery pillar removed from before the children of Israel and went behind them, it was because it was most needed behind them. So it is with us. When the Lord removes his manifest presence, there is a need be for it!

“God in Israel sows the seeds
Of affliction, pain and toil:
These spring up and choke the weeds
That would else o’erspread the soil.”

When the Lord Jesus hides himself for a moment, it is to make us value him the more (Song of Solomon 4:16-58).

(Song of Songs 4:16) “Awake, O north wind; and come, thou south; blow upon my garden, *that* the spices thereof may flow out. Let my beloved come into his garden, and eat his pleasant fruits.”

(Song of Songs 5:1) “I am come into my garden, my sister, *my* spouse: I have gathered my myrrh with my spice; I have eaten my honeycomb with my honey; I have drunk my wine with my milk: eat, O friends; drink, yea, drink abundantly, O beloved.”

(Song of Songs 5:2-8) “I sleep, but my heart waketh: *it is* the voice of my beloved that knocketh, *saying*, Open to me, my sister, my love, my dove, my undefiled: for my head is filled with dew, *and* my locks with the drops of the night. (3) I have put off my coat; how shall I put it on? I have washed my feet; how shall I defile them? (4) My beloved put in his hand by the hole *of the door*, and my bowels were moved for him. (5) I rose up to open to my beloved; and my hands dropped *with* myrrh, and my fingers *with* sweet smelling myrrh, upon the handles of the lock. (6) I opened to my beloved; but my beloved had withdrawn himself, *and* was gone: my soul failed when he spake: I sought him, but I could not find him; I called him, but he gave me no answer. (7) The watchmen that went about the city found me, they smote me, they wounded me; the keepers of the walls took away my veil from me. (8) I charge you, O daughters of Jerusalem, if ye find my beloved, that ye tell him, that I *am* sick of love.”

WITH US STILL

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Now, let me show you another thing. I've already hinted at it; but I want you to see it clearly. **Though the pillar of cloud and fire was not seen, though it was removed from before them, it was with them still.** The angel of the Lord removed, but he "*removed and went behind them.*" He was just as much with them when he was in the rear, as when he went before them. Though it appeared that the Lord had utterly forsaken them, he was fighting for them. Their Sun was hidden from their eyes, but he was still their Shield behind. — "*The glory of the Lord was their reward.*"

Now hear me, my brother. Hear me, my sister. The Lord with you still, and fighting for you, when cannot see him. He is still your Salvation. He is still saving you. The Lord's presence is not to be determined by our awareness of it. When you are sighing and crying after him, those very sighs and cries after him are the fruit of his secret presence. It may be, in fact, I suspect it is indeed true, that he is more really near when we think he has forsaken us altogether, when our hearts are breaking for him, than in those times when we are "*at ease in Zion*" and speak confidently.

Look at the last line of verse 19. Moses tells us that "*the pillar of the cloud went from before their face, and stood behind them.*" **It "stood behind them."** I like that! It stood, firmly fixed behind them. The Angel of the Lord, shrouded in the cloud, stood with his drawn sword in the rear of Israel, saying to Pharaoh, "Proceed no further. You shall not touch my chosen." He lifted up his vast shield of darkness, and held it up before the tyrant king, so that he could not even see, much less harm Israel! All that night his horses chomped their bits, and pulled their chariots, and the soldiers rattled their swords, spinning around in circles! Then, "*They were as still as a stone till thy people passed over, O Lord, till thy people passed over whom thou hadst purchased*" (15:16). The Lord stood there, behind his people; and their furious enemy was could not touch them.

So it is with us! There are times when we can see nothing before us to give us hope and joy, but the living God stands behind us to fight off the adversary. He cannot forsake his own. He says to us, out of the pillar of cloud, "*Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb? Yea, they may forget, yet will I not forget thee.*"

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Look at this again. **If the children of Israel had simply looked back, they would have seen the Lord behind them just as clearly as they had seen him before them.** If your soul is troubled and heavy because you cannot see the Lord before you, look back and see how the Lord has helped you hitherto. Look back. What see you behind you? — Loving-kindness and tender mercy, and nothing else. As I look back upon my own past life, I cannot find anything but Christ. I cannot find anything but goodness and mercy. — *“Truly God is good to Israel!”* — *“His mercy endureth forever!”* Not one good thing has failed me. He has never left me, nor forsaken me. I have received blessings through my joys, and even greater blessings through my sorrows. The Lord’s way has been all goodness, undiluted goodness, all the days of my life. I look back, and see the light of his presence shining like the sun at noon; it is as a morning without clouds. I am overwhelmed with his boundless mercy, grace and love! He has been mindful of us, he will bless us. He gave us mercies yesterday; and he is the same today and forever. **Past mercies are the assurance of present mercy, and the promise of future mercies.**

- Election
- Redemption
- Calling
- Preservation
- Providence

If the rainbow were always visible it might not be so assuring a token of the covenant. So the Lord wisely and graciously reveals it sparingly; but the covenant of which the bow speaks is as sure as it is everlasting. Spurgeon said, “The Lord deals with us in all wisdom and prudence. His modes change, but the changes are all from the same motive, and with the same reason, all to make us sick of self and fond of him. Blessed be his name.”

SWEETLY REVEALED

Third, I want you to look at verse 20 and see that **the Lord’s presence was sweetly revealed when the time was right.**

(Exodus 14:20) “And it came between the camp of the Egyptians and the camp of Israel; and it was a cloud and darkness *to them*, but it gave light by night *to these*: so that the one came not near the other all the night.”

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Can you imagine Israel's joy when they saw that pillar of fire lighting the night before them? The children of Israel were commanded to "*go forward*" to the Red Sea; and they must "*go forward*" by faith, trusting nothing but the Word of God. Therefore, the pillar withdrew from before them and stood behind them.

Faith performs her greatest feats in the darkest places. These Israelites were to march right down into the heart of the Red Sea. It was a raging torrent. The Spirit of God says, by his servant Moses, "*The floods stood upright as an heap, and the depths were congealed in the heart of the sea.*" Yet, "*the children of Israel walked upon dry land in the midst of the sea; and the waters were a wall unto them on their right hand, and on their left.*" The fact that they walked through the sea, between two huge walls of water tells me that they walked before God in faith! I do not know, but it seems to me it would be far easier to get out of a little boat on a stormy sea and walked across the water, as Peter did, than to walk through two huge walls of water.

Yet, these millions descended into the abyss as believing God. Moses lifted up his rod and the waters rolled apart to open the way before them. And they marched forward, not with fear and trembling, not with haste or by flight (Isaiah 52:12), but in faith, believing God, with fiery and cloudy pillar behind them, not before them! **That is faith.** Faith is not saying I believe God. Faith is hazarding life itself upon God! They could not have acted in such great faith, had the fiery and cloudy pillar gone before them.

We always want to be coddled and cuddled, like babies. We always want love-visits and delights. We want all the promises sealed to our hearts all the time. If we could, we would eat candy all the time, and be rolled into heaven in a stroller. But our heavenly Father will not have it so. He commands us to "*go forward*" in faith; and he sees to it that we do. He commands us to grow in "*the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ;*" and he graciously sees that we do. He is always with us, always holding our hands, upholding us by the omnipotent right hand of his righteousness; but he does not always let us know his presence or know the firmness of his grip.

Our heavenly Father never spoils his children. He makes them grow. He makes us grow, or we never would. He takes away his manifest presence that we may follow him by faith. — Job would never have become the man he was, had he not lost everything. Then, he cried out in faith, "*Though he*

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slay me, yet will I trust in him.” — We would never have known the name of Abraham, had he not been called out of Ur, forced to forsake everything, even to sacrifice his son Isaac. Only by such great trials as God brought upon him did he come to know the Lord Jesus by his name, Jehovah-jireh.

Then, at the best, most suitable time, when patience has done her perfect work, through manifold trials, the Lord appears in his great glory and grace, and gives light by night to his own, just as he did to Israel, as they walked into the sea.

- Israel knew his presence, though there was no token of his presence before them.
- Israel walked in the light, though all was darkness around them.
- Israel walked in the light, in a straight path, while the Egyptians were utterly confused by darkness.

They cast all their care upon him who cared for them, and then they knew their way. Then they knew God’s way. They knew it with absolute certainty, because there was no other way for them to go. Turn to 1 Corinthians 10, where the Holy Spirit tells us that all these things happened that they might teach us something; and I will show you what these things teach us.

(1 Corinthians 10:13) “There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God *is* faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear *it*.”

God promised these people, in verse 13, “*Fear ye not, stand still, and see the salvation of the LORD, which he will shew to you to day: for the Egyptians whom ye have seen to day, ye shall see them again no more for ever.*” And they never saw them again. Now, let me apply that to you and me. There are your sins; will you look back on them for a minute? Look steadily. They are as dreadful as the Egyptian horsemen and chariots. I have looked intently, and I cannot see a sin remaining. “What, have you lived so perfectly that you have never sinned?” You know better. I mourn countless offenses, but I cannot see one of them now, for my sin is gone. It has been drowned in the Red Sea of Christ’s precious blood. — “*The blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin.*” It is written, “*The iniquity of Israel shall be sought for, and there shall be none; and the sins of Judah, and they shall not be found; for I will pardon them whom I reserve.*” The

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Egyptians shall not come near us all the night of this life; and when the morning breaks, we shall see them dead upon the shore. Then shall we sing unto the Lord, “*for he hath triumphed gloriously,*” and our iniquities, transgressions and sins he has cast into the depths of the sea. Then,

“Far from a world of grief and sin,
With God eternally shut in.”

The glory of the Lord that has been our reward shall shine everlastingly before us!

(Exodus 14:30-31) “Thus the LORD saved Israel that day out of the hand of the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead upon the sea shore. (31) And Israel saw that great work which the LORD did upon the Egyptians: and the people feared the LORD, and believed the LORD, and his servant Moses.”

Amen.