

God's Leading in our Lives

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Text: Exodus 13:17, 20-22¹

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Introduction: Open your Bible this morning to **Exodus 13**. This morning I want to talk about "The Holy Spirit's Leading".

Leadership Test

Can I ask you a question this morning? How is the leadership in your home? We find in many homes that husband and wife are going in different directions. Children and parents are tugging in different directions. We see this in many churches and in ours from time to time. As long as we are still on earth, there will be plenty of misunderstandings and miscommunications.

If you are not following God's leading, you are about as safe as a blind man on the I-90 Expressway!

How we need God's leadership! If we are not following God, we will go astray and cause untold damage to ourselves and our children. But if we follow God's leading, we will be blessed, and we will be able to boldly make decisions in life that are both wise and safe.

God Promises to Lead His People

God promises to lead His people. Christ says "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me" (**John 10:27**). We come to Christ and we say, "I am His and He is mine" (**Song 2:16**). He promises: "I will never leave you nor forsake you" (**Heb. 13:5**).

In **Exodus 13**, as we come to the Exodus of Israel, we must consider that God will lead His people. He will lead you and me.

The children of Israel did what God commanded. Darkness fell upon the land. Those who slayed the lamb and put it's blood on their doorposts, eating the lamb in celebration would all be delivered.

So they are delivered! Then what? What should they do? Where should they go? Let's read how God led the children of Israel in **Exodus 13:17-22**.

Exodus 13:17, 20-22, "When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near. For God said, "Lest the people change their minds when they see war and return to Egypt."

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture is from the *English Standard Version* of the Bible.

Verse 20-22 “And they moved on from Succoth and encamped at Etham, on the edge of the wilderness. 21 And the LORD went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them along the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night. 22 The pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night did not depart from before the people.”

I want to demonstrate this morning that God always leads His people. Just as He led the children of Israel with a pillar of cloud and fire, representing His very presence, He will lead us.

I. **What is this pillar of cloud / fire?** (Psa. 105:39; Exo. 40:34-35).

A. The pillar of cloud / fire is ***not*** an **allegory**, but occurred in history (Psa. 105:39).

When the Lord God brought Israel out of Egypt, “He spread a cloud for a covering; and fire to give light by night” (Psalm 105:39).

What is this? It is *not* an allegory. An allegory is something that is fiction that teaches a lesson, like a parable. This is a type or a shadow. It is an actual historical event that occurred to point us to the Lord Jesus Christ.

So as we look at this act of God in the Old Testament, it’s not just about God’s mercy and grace to Israel, but it points forward to God’s mercy and grace to us in Christ.

What was this pillar of cloud by day and fire by night? One Jewish scholar described it as this:

[T]he God of the Hebrew Bible is a Being who transcends the limits of time and space, and thus surpasses human imagining. Hence, God’s indwelling Presence in the world is symbolized, however inadequately, by the mysterious, intangible, incorporeal elements of fire and cloud—actually a diaphanous, luminescent mist visible both by day and by night.²

B. The pillar of cloud / fire is God’s **Shekinah** glory (Exo. 40:34-35).

By day and night this was a manifestation of God’s presence.

Exodus 40 tells us what this cloud was. **Exodus 40:34-35**, “Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. 35 And Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled on it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. 36 Throughout all their journeys, whenever the cloud was taken up from over the tabernacle, the people

² Nahum M Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 70.

of Israel would set out. 37 But if the cloud was not taken up, then they did not set out till the day that it was taken up. 38 For the cloud of the LORD was on the tabernacle by day, and fire was in it by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel throughout all their journeys.”

Shekinah Glory

This is God’s Shekinah glory. This is the essence of God being revealed in splendor and glory.

This cloud was large enough that all Israel (probably 2 to 3 million Jews) could see the pillar God’s presence even from a distance. It was a breathtaking, awe inspiring sight. It was unmistakable.

The pillar of cloud and fire was the Shekinah glory of God manifesting to God’s people. Think of it as an extended Old Testament transfiguration. God was building their faith.

C. The pillar of cloud / fire points to **Christ** (Isa. 4:2, 5; 1 Cor. 10:1-3, 11).

Isaiah tells us that there will be a day when the “**Branch**”, speaking of our Lord Jesus Christ, “**shall be beautiful and glorious**” and the glory of the Lord will be among His people. Let’s look at **Isaiah 4:2 and 5**.

Isaiah 4:2, 5, “**In that day the branch of the LORD shall be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the land shall be the pride and honor of the survivors of Israel...**”

Verse 5, “**Then the LORD will create over the whole site of Mount Zion and over her assemblies a cloud by day, and smoke and the shining of a flaming fire by night; for over all the glory there will be a canopy.**”

Mount Zion, Christ’s Church

The writer of Hebrews tells us in Heb. 12 that the church is the fulfillment of all the Old Testament types and shadows, and that the real thing is better than the shadows. Christ is better than Moses, and the Lord’s church is better than Mount Zion. In fact, in **Hebrews 12:22**, the writer of Hebrews tells us that Christ’s church, you and me, are “Mount Zion”. **Hebrews 12:22–24** (ESV) — “**But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, 23 and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect 24 and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant**”.

Do you see Isaiah’s beautiful prophecy, and how in Christ’s the pillar of God’s Shekinah glory will be among His church?

Christ, the cloud, the manna, the Rock

Consider Paul's interpretation of this passage in **1 Corinthians 10**.

1 Corinthians 10:1-3, 11, "I want you to know, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, 2 and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud [God's glory] and in the sea, 3 and all ate the same spiritual food, 4 and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ. 11 Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come."

They were all baptized in the cloud, ate the same spiritual food and spiritual drink. Yes, there was a physical **cloud**, but they were baptized into Christ. There was physical **manna** that they ate, but the food they ate, if they ate by faith, was Christ. And yes they drank physical **water from a Rock**, but that water pointed to the spiritual drink which is Christ.

As the song says, *He is...*

*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
[speaking of the manna]
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;
[speaking of the Rock that Moses struck]
Let the **fire and cloudy pillar**
Lead me all my journey through...*

What do we learn from this?

1. God **manifests** Himself to His people (2 Cor. 3:18).

This pillar of cloud and fire was Israel's pillar, Israel's guide, Israel's protection. It belonged to and was for Israel alone. It gave light to none but Israel. It gave protection to none but Israel. None but the people of God whom he brought out of the land of Egypt, none but the people of his choice and his covenant received any benefit from the pillar of his grace.

Just as in the Old Testament with the pillar of cloud and fire, God's Shekinah glory shines in us!

How? **2 Corinthians 3:18**, “And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.”

We talked about this several weeks ago, how that in the Old Testament ministry, there were types and shadows that pointed to Christ, but in the New Testament we have the reality. The Shekinah glory of God in the Old Testament was revealed in a physical pillar of cloud and fire and it represented God’s presence. In the New Testament, we behold the glory of the Lord by looking into Christ, and we are transformed by His Spirit. So the glory of the Lord transforms us and is in us! And where does this transformation and glory come from? Paul tells us: “For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.” (**2 Cor. 3:18**).

2. God wants His people to *know* Him (John 1:14). God sent the ultimate manifestation of Himself to this earth. The pillar of cloud and fire pointed to Jesus Christ!

The greatest manifestation of God’s presence is Jesus Christ.

John 1:14 (ESV) — “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.”

He came that we might know Him! He says in **John 17:3**, speaking of His precious sheep that He’s about to die for, “this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.”

3. God wants His people to *draw near* Him.
The pillar of God’s Shekinah glory was always in the middle of the camp of Israel. He would not depart from them, but they could depart from Him.

Let us not depart from God. **James 4:8** says, “Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.”

II. How does God lead? (Exo. 13:17-22; Num. 9:21-23).

- A. First of all, we must say that God does indeed **lead** His people.

Exo. 13:21, “And the LORD went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them along the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night. 22 The pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night did not depart from before the people.”

He promises: “I will never leave you nor forsake you” (**Heb. 13:5**).

Numbers 9:21–23 (ESV) — “...sometimes the cloud remained from evening until morning. And when the cloud lifted in the morning, they set out, or if it continued for a day and a night, when the cloud lifted they set out. 22 Whether it was two days, or a month, or a longer time, that the cloud continued over the tabernacle, abiding there, the people of Israel remained in camp and did not set out, but when it lifted they set out. 23 At the command of the LORD they camped, and at the command of the LORD they set out. They kept the charge of the LORD, at the command of the LORD by Moses.”

We dare not launch out on our own with out the Lord. We must wait until God leads us.

B. God leads **tenderly**.

Exodus 13:17, “When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near. For God said, “**Lest the people change their minds** when they see war and return to Egypt.”

John Wesley said, ““Every one, though born of God in an instant, yet undoubtedly grows by slow degrees.”³

God leads us tenderly and carefully, not giving us more than we can handle with His help. He is our shade by day and our light of fire by night.

When the Lord God brought Israel out of Egypt, “He spread a cloud for a covering; and fire to give light by night” (Psalm 105:39).

C. God leads **personally**.

Exodus 13:20-21 “And they moved on from Succoth and encamped at Etham, on the edge of the wilderness. 21 And the LORD went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them along the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night.”

Two things I want you to see here—they moved on, and God personally guided them by day and by night. That’s 24 and 7.

In this passage, we see a beautiful picture of how God leads His people. His presence is manifested by a cloud of His Shekinah glory by day and a cloud of fire by night. These are just physical manifestations. What we must realize that although this is an Old Testament shadow, that they were led by Christ!

God has always led His people personally, specifically, He does it by His Holy Spirit. **Romans 8:14**, “For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.”

³ from a letter in the *Works of John Wesley*

D. God leads us **faithfully**.

Exodus 13:22, “The pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night did not depart from before the people.”

He says, “I will never leave you nor forsake you”.

As **Hebrews 12:2** says, Jesus is “the founder and perfecter of our faith”.

Paul says in **Philippians 1:6**, “I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.”

If you are struggling in an area of sin and doubt, please understand that if you are born again, God’s going to work in you. God’s not given you more than you can handle. He’s not harsh or domineering. His voice is still and small. He loves you and He will lead you!

III. How can we **know** that God is leading us?

I want to get some insights from God’s Shekinah glory pillar.

A. We can know God is leading us because of the **Spirit’s assurance**.

God’s very presence was in that cloud, but we have that same presence of God in our hearts.

Galatians 4:6, “And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’”

B. God leads us objectively and subjectively through His **Word** (**Luke 16:19-31**).

1. Objectively, God’s Word is the **light** to our path.

Ps 119:105, “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.”

The doctrine of the Word of God is what our faith is built upon. Even if we had a cloudy pillar of fire, with God’s Shekinah glory burning in the midst of us, that is not as powerful as what God does in our hearts through His Word.

We have something greater than a physical manifestation of God’s glory.

Consider **Luke 16:19–31** (ESV) — “There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. 20 And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, 21 who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man’s table. Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his sores. 22 The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried, 23 and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. 24 And he called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on

me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.’ 25 But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. 26 And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.’ 27 And he said, ‘Then I beg you, father, to send him [*the dead Lazarus*] to my father’s house— 28 for I have five brothers— so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.’ 29 But Abraham said, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.’ 30 And he said, ‘No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ 31 He said to him, ‘If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.’ ”

2. Subjectly, God’s Word brings us to a place of **awe** before God (Luke 24:32; 2 Cor. 3:18; Jn. 10:27).

Seeking our own comfort

Note of warning and encouragement: Let me warn you, that we are not to be led by our feelings, or make choices simply for your own comfort. Now it is not wrong to seek your own comfort. When you are tired, God tells us that “He gives His beloved sleep”. Solomon tells us that God gives us food and friends, and family, and all is to be enjoyed for God’s glory. God gives us marriage to express a special affection and have an intimacy and companionship that He made beautiful.

You will always seek comfort. Both your spiritual nature and fleshly nature seek comfort. The flesh looks for comfort by instant gratification in the world. The spiritual nature looks for comfort in God. So seek comfort, but seek it in the right place—seek comfort and satisfaction in God.

Having said that, God’s given us a place to find the comfort of His leading, His Word, and it is more powerful than the pillar of cloud.

Remember the two disciples on the road to Emmaus? What did they say in **Luke 24:32**?

The cloud was large enough that all Israel (probably 2 to 3 million Jews) could see the pillar God’s presence even from a distance. It was a breathtaking, awe inspiring sight. It was unmistakable.

But more awe-inspiring is how God’s Word reveals God to us!

Luke 24:32, “Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?”

God will lead us as we see Him in His Word (2 Cor. 3:18, Jn 10:27). **John 10:27**, “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.”

Like Isaiah, through God’s Word, we need to see God “high and lifted up”. Then we will boldly go forward for Him! We will say, “Here am I send me”

- C. God’s leading is always **away** from the world (Exo. 14:19-20). **Exodus 14:19–20** (ESV) — “Then the angel of God who was going before the host of Israel moved and went behind them, and the pillar of cloud moved from before them and stood behind them, 20 coming between the host of Egypt and the host of Israel. And there was the cloud and the darkness. And it lit up the night without one coming near the other all night.”

The presence of God in God’s Shekinah pillar of glory was darkness to the Egyptians but light to His people. And they were completely protected by God. The Egyptians did not come near God’s people all night. They were safe.

You are always safe when you walk according to God’s guidance.

- D. God’s leading requires, urgent, **fervent** prayer. **James 5:16**, “The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.”

Consider all the time Moses spent at the burning bush and on the mountain conversing with God and getting the plan from God. Over and over again, all along the way before God led the Hebrews out of Egypt, Moses was praying, praying, and praying!

So we must pray fervently that God will lead us, our families and our church into His will. If you stop praying you will be walking blindly. But let us pray urgently and fervently for God to lead us.

- E. There comes a time to discern God’s leading and walk forward by **faith**.

Often leads us into situations that are **more than we can handle**. Consider Pharaoh and his army. Consider the Red Sea. God led the way. It was so daunting that the children of Israel began to complain!

But there comes a time to stop fearing and start trusting! Let’s read in...

Exodus 14:10-16, “When Pharaoh drew near, the people of Israel lifted up their eyes, and behold, the Egyptians were marching after them, and they feared greatly. And the people of Israel cried out to the LORD. 11 They said to Moses, ‘Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us in bringing us out of Egypt? 12 Is not this what we said to you in Egypt, ‘Leave us alone that we may serve the Egyptians’? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die

in the wilderness.” 13 And Moses said to the people, “**Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the LORD**, which he will work for you today. For the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall never see again. 14 The LORD will fight for you, and **you have only to be silent**. 15 The LORD said to Moses, “**Why do you cry to me? Tell the people of Israel to go forward**. 16 Lift up your staff, and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it, that the people of Israel may go through the sea on dry ground.”

Conclusion: It is right to learn from this passage that God will lead us. No matter the trial, no matter the foe, no matter the heat we must endure, no matter the darkness through which we must pass, we can trust that God will be with us. The pillar of God’s presence never departed from the people. “The pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night did not depart from before the people” (Ex 13:22). The Lord will never cease to be to our souls the Pillar of Cloud and Fire, until he has brought us into the land of our rest, in which we shall have neither enemy nor darkness!