God with Us - Part 3

# The Cloud and the Fire

## Numbers 21.4-9

For many weeks now we have been walking with the Israelites, traveling through the wilderness, on this journey from Egypt to the promised land. And the problem with the wilderness is that it’s a place of uncertainty, because there aren’t any street signs, no guard rails, or even anyone to help you know which way to go. And the truth of the matter is that no matter who you are, somewhere between your first breath and last breath you will find yourself in the wilderness. The wilderness can be confusing and it’ll affect your emotions, leaving you baffled and feeling lost, wandering aimlessly because it’s a place of uncertainty, much like the global pandemic we’re all walking through today.

Now, normally, if you’re in the wilderness you can lean on your family, your friends, or your neighbors, but today there’s no one to lean on because we’re all in this wilderness together. We have never had so many variables playing a role in our lives as we have right now. Not only is our nation in spiritual decline, but there’s this racial unrest, the economy’s in an uproar, the political climate is swirling, and we’ve got a virus that’s relentlessly circling the globe and nobody knows how to stop it.

Today, we’re in a wilderness, but we can’t even pick up the phone and call somebody, because we don’t know where we are, where we should be going or how we’re going to get there. Everything’s just so much different today, there’s no qualifiers because we’ve never been here before. Many of us look back, longing for the good old days, you know back in January and February when you could make plans and travel anywhere, but today things have changed so much. We are living in unparalleled times, extraordinary times, times which leave us tense, easily agitated, uneasy at best and incredibly angry at worst.

And so, you try to talk to people and there is this deep sense of hopelessness, a lack of confidence, just questioning everybody and everything. You know, who’s behind this anyway and who can we trust? And so, things aren’t going well for many people right now, because they’re all alone, separated and isolated. Many are slipping back into destructive habits, there’s this sense of uneasiness, a feeling of uncertainty, because this pandemic is a barren wilderness. And that’s why this message is so important, because what you feel like you might be missing is still right there in front of you. You see, even though the Israelites were still there in the wilderness, the promise remained, their purpose was the same, because the goal was still ahead.

Some of us, need to shake the uncertainty out of our minds, awaken from our slumber, remembering that we are the church, we’re on a rescue mission, and that we’re ambassadors of God with a commission to help people be reconciled to God. In fact, in this global pandemic nothing has changed, the commission remains the same, we’re still the church and there are still people all around us who are sick, hurting, and all alone. And so, we want to do everything possible to reach people who don’t know the love of God through Christ Jesus and help them come to experience God’s forgiveness for themselves.

Now, last week we saw how the Israelites built a place in the wilderness, a sanctuary, a tabernacle to have fellowship with God, because he wanted to live with them and walk among them. In the same way, even now in this season of COVID-19, God’s plan and purpose remains the same, he wants us to live by the Spirit; he wants us to keep in step with the Spirit, because the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. God’s desire has always been to have fellowship with his creation and that’s why even over 50 years after the resurrection of Christ the apostle John wrote to the church saying:

*“We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ” (1 John 1:3).*

And so, God’s desire is not that the Church would just have head knowledge of who he is and what he has done; but that we would have fellowship with him, that we would be one with him through the atoning sacrifice of his Son Jesus Christ.

You see, God’s will for the Church, God’s will for you and me, is that having received the very life and nature of Christ, that we would have a personal relationship with him. It’s for that reason that he has made himself known to us, drawing us to himself, inviting us to receive Christ, and sanctifying us by his Spirit, so that he could dwell within us. That’s why the Bible tells us in Colossians chapter 1, that,

*“God has chosen to make known…the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Colossians 1:27).*

In other words, it’s a mystery, it’s something that was hidden for a while. And so, all through the Old Testament God was preparing us for this, it was something that was foreshadowed in the tabernacle, but no one fully understood what that meant. And yet, this is what the Israelites experienced, this is what we’ve seen, God’s throne is no longer restricted to heaven, we’re not just going to meet him on the mountaintop, because now he’s come down on the ground.

In Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers we’ve this cycle of motion, this fluidity with the presence of God. The Israelites were learning that because God dwells among them they have to learn to move when he moves, to flow like he flows, so that they would always remain in unison with him. And so, day by day and month by month, life became a spiritual encounter for the people of God; and the tabernacle was constructed as a testimony to the authenticity of God’s presence.

Numbers chapter 9, verse 15 tells us, *“On the day the tabernacle, the Tent of the Testimony, was set up, the cloud covered it. From evening till morning, the cloud above the tabernacle looked like fire. That is how it continued to be; the cloud covered it, and at night it looked like fire” (Numbers 9:15-16).*

And so, the Israelites would gather around the tabernacle, standing to the North, the South, the East and the West; just hanging out in the shadows of the presence of God. And there before them was the cloud by day and the fire by night, covering the tent and its furnishings, those six pieces of furniture symbolic of the redemptive plan of God. And the Bible says that,

*“Whenever the cloud lifted from above the Tent, the Israelites set out; wherever the cloud settled, the Israelites encamped. At the Lord's command the Israelites set out, and at his command they encamped. As long as the cloud stayed over the tabernacle, they remained in camp” (Numbers 9:17-18).*

And so, they moved here and there according to the infinite and incomprehensible mind of God. And it was this movement that was evidence of the presence and the favor of God because he’s always moving, he’s always working, breathing and flowing. But whenever the cloud settled, the Israelites would erect the tabernacle again as a testimony to his presence, the fact that God was there, and they worshiped him in the desert wilderness.

As they began to worship, it was there on the bronze altar that they encountered the glory of God. Moses and Aaron offered sacrifices of meat, bread, and incense, sprinkling the blood according to the Lord’s command before going into the tent of meeting. They drew near to God, their sacrifices were acceptable to God, and the Bible says when they came out of the tent:

*“The glory of the Lord appeared to all the people. Fire came out from the presence of the Lord and consumed the burnt offering and the fat portions on the altar. And when all the people saw it, they shouted for joy and fell facedown” (Leviticus 9:23-24).*

This opening ceremony of the tabernacle was a pivotal moment in Israel’s history because they’d never been in the presence of such glory. The tabernacle was in a class by itself, but it wasn’t about the beauty of the tabernacle, it wasn’t about the gold furnishings or the architecture of the ark, it wasn’t about the beautiful woven tapestries, the ornate garments of the priests, or the splendor and pageantry of the ceremony. None of that is what caused the people to be in awe, it was when God’s glory sat down on his throne, when he sat down on what they built, when he anointed what they’d built, and suddenly all they could see was the glory of God.

In that moment when God’s glory, his undefinable, indescribable glory sat down in the tabernacle, the presence of God was so powerful that the leaders and the people stopped and fell face down in worship. The glory became so strong in the holy of holies that is filled every room in the tent, it flowed out into the courtyard, and every corner was filled with his glory. It was a powerful glory, a visible glory, and the Bible says that fire came out from his presence.

*“When all the people saw it, they shouted for joy and fell facedown” (Leviticus 9:24).*

And I pray that you are getting this, that the glory of God is getting into you. Those of you watching online, I pray that the glory is getting into your living room and your kitchen, because the glory came down. In this unforgettable moment the presence of God came down and dwelt among us, divinity and humanity come face-to-face, and when the glory came in everyone fell prostrate on the ground soaking in the presence and the anointing of God. They saw the glory, but what they did not see, what they didn’t understand was the glory of God’s promise.

You see, the tabernacle, all of the curtains, the tent of meeting, the furniture and utensils, the priesthood and its function were all just a shadow of greater things. All of this was the legacy of Moses and by the grace of God he laid the foundation as an expert builder, but what he built was a shadow of Jesus Christ. The glory and the fire of God’s presence tested the quality of his work, but to see all that in its magnificence and not to recognize the future glory is to miss the point.

It was the function of the priesthood and this demonstration of power and glory that are pointing us to Jesus Christ as our great high priest. And so, he was made to be like us in every way, so that he might become our merciful and faithful high priest. The Bible tells us,

*“When Christ came as high priest of the good things that are already here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not man-made, that is to say, not a part of this creation. He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood…” (Hebrews 9:11-12).*

And he is the Lamb of God who was slain to take away the sins of the world, but all of this was just a shadow of that future glory. When the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us, and yet today, we have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only who came from the Father, full of grace and truth (John 1:14).

And so, God gave Moses the plans, the authority, and the resources to build the tabernacle. By faith Moses builds a place to worship God, but he didn’t recognize that what he was building was something so much bigger than what he thought. He illustrates that God is able…

*“…to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us” (Ephesians 3:20).*

But in spite of what they’d built, in spite of his power and glory, the Israelites would soon forget this moment. They broke camp and set out leaving the environment of worship, leaving the praise of the tabernacle, and the Bible tells us in Numbers chapter 10,

*“On the twentieth day of the second month of the second year, the cloud lifted from above the tabernacle... The Israelites set out from the Desert of Sinai and traveled from place to place until the cloud came to rest in the Desert of Paran” (Numbers 10:11-12).*

Suddenly, they find themselves walking in the wilderness again, following the presence of God in the cloud, and three days after leaving camp, three days after experiencing God’s glorious presence like never before, the Israelites are complaining again. The Bible says,

*“The people complained about their hardships in the hearing of the Lord, and when he heard them his anger was aroused. Then fire from the Lord burned among them and consumed some of the outskirts of the camp. When the people cried out to Moses, he prayed to the Lord and the fire died down” (Numbers 11:1-2).*

In just a matter of days they became nervous and uncertain, they are grumbling and complaining about the same God who has been providing for them and protecting them in the cloud by day and the fire by night. Complaining about the same God that they had just fallen on their faces in the presence of his glory and now they’re looking at him like they’ve never met them before. And that’s what the wilderness will do, the wilderness does something to you, when you were in isolation, everything is in transition, there is this uncertainty. When you’re walking with all of your possessions on your back and your family following behind you, it will change the way that you walk and it’ll change the way you talk. *That’s why the Bible says,*

*“Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our "God is a consuming fire” (Hebrews 12:28-29).*

In other words, God has a way of bringing you to your knees, and I don’t know if the Israelites had some sort of mental disorder, some sort of disillusionment from the wilderness. But certainly, they forgot how to be content, they forgot that God had helped them, forgot that God had delivered them, and even worse they forgot how to be happy.

The Bible says that as they traveled, sometimes the cloud settled only for a night, other times for a few days, maybe a month or year, but when it lifted, they would set out again. In Numbers chapter 21, as they were circling along the route to the Red Sea, the people grew impatient and it’s no wonder, because they’re recognizing the scenery again, they’ve been circling in the wilderness for 38 years, and so they spoke against God and Moses saying,

*“Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!” (Numbers 21:5).*

Now, it’s one thing to grumble and complain about things on earth, but when you grumble and complain about God, especially after all he has done for you, after he has blessed you, after he has made a way where there was no way. When you grumble and complain against God you’d better watch out, because God can get tired of it. He can get tired of your excuses, tired of you ignoring him, tired of you telling him that you don’t need him. And he has a way of sending something to get your attention, a way to get you to stop playing church, a way to bring you down to your knees.

The Israelites turned their back on God and verse six says,

*“Then the Lord sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, "We sinned when we spoke against the Lord and against you. Pray that the Lord will take the snakes away from us." So Moses prayed for the people” (Numbers 21:6-7).*

Snakes were coming out of everywhere, the Israelites don’t even know which way to run, and so there was only one thing that they know to do. This has gotten serious because there are people dying, they are feverish, shaking with chills, and so they come crawling up to Moses and said, “We have sinned, we are sorry, please pray for us.” And so, they started confessing, we have lost our way, we have forgotten God, because God always knows what it takes to make you say I’m sorry. He knows exactly what it takes to humble you, and so they are calling on God on their knees, they’re delirious, their vision is blurring, their pulse is weak, but in verse eight God gave Moses a cure. He said to Moses,

*“Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live." So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, he lived” (Numbers 21:8-9).*

Now, we know that God is into symbolism and you might have thought that he would have said make a cross. But God said, “Make a snake” which is kind of interesting because that is what caused the trouble in the first place. And so, God says make a cure from the very thing that was destroying them. In other words, God would take what was meant for evil and he would turn it into good.

And so, there are people dying, people crawling to Moses looking for a cure, and he tells them to look up. The Bible says in John chapter 3,

*“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life” (John 3:14-15).*

And so, it’s important that we understand the correlation between the cause and the cure, because the same thing that was causing death is the same thing that cures it. That’s why Jesus had to go to the cross, that’s why the Bible said that he became sin,

*“God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21).*

You see, he had to be a sinless sacrifice to cover our sin, but as long as he was holy and righteous, he couldn’t redeem us. And so, he had to become the same thing, he had to become sin, he had to become a curse for us, and the Bible says that he did.

*“Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree” (Galatians 3:13).*

And so, God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. That is so important, because if he had been lifted up as the Lion of the Tribe of Judah he could not have related to our condition. He would not have been family, he would not have been familiar to our cause, and he couldn’t have been our kinsman redeemer, but because he became one of us, he became sin for us.

And so, just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, and Jesus said,

*“When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all men to myself” (John 12:32).*

Today, if you are stuck somewhere in the wilderness, because there’s nothing is that we can believing. If you’ve got a sickness, God has a cure, and the answer is Jesus. He is that balm in Gilead that heals our diseases. Jesus is the gospel that keeps us alive and today no matter who you are or where you are God has leveled the playing field. Our forgiveness, our healing, and our hope is in Christ alone and so I invite you to hold on to your faith like never before.

You see, the Scripture tells us and I will close with this, but the Bible says that, *“God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross” (Colossians 2:13-14).*

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