

# The Journey: Walking in a Cloud

## Numbers 9:15-18

4/28/24

Good morning Church! What an awesome time yesterday! What an awesome turnout! Over 100 people turned out for Tidy Town! We hope to make this an annual community-wide event that draws hundreds if not a thousand out to Give Back to the community one day in Jesus' name! The vision is to "transform the city through service!" Thank you all who came out!

Today we are making a big leap, from Exodus 32 Numbers 9. Why? Not much occurs in the rest of the book of Exodus that we can talk about except for the Ten Commandments but that'll be another series on its own. The rest of Exodus covers the planning for and building of the Tabernacle we talked about last week.

Leviticus comes next and it expounds in detail what the Ten Commandments look like in every area of your life! It is a hard book to read but if you want to know what obedience to God looks like there you go! Just don't apply it to your life legalistically or self-righteously.

Then comes Numbers, also a tough book to read. We will skip the first 8 chapters because they simply cover how God organized the tribes and the priesthood. Every organization needs structure to sustain it. Our bodies need structure, or we wouldn't be able to function. That's the purpose of our skeletal system.

It's not until chapter 9 that something interesting occurs. God begins to lead Israel on a daily basis. Before, God spoke to Moses and showed up when needed but now God puts his presence, his very self at the center of the camp for all to see, which is where God wants to be, at the center of our lives for all to see!

What the passage focuses on is the normal or most frequent way God relates to his people. This is important because unless you know the norm of how God relates to us you'll have unrealistic expectations of God which can lead to frustration and disappointment with Him! Expectations are so important in our lives. What you base your expectations on can help you thrive or lead to a lot of distress.

I'll give you an example of this. Burger King! I love their Whopper. It is my favorite fast-food burger. BUT that love is undermined when I look at the picture of the Whopper they use on their signs and advertisements. Here's what they advertise! Is that what you get? No. Here's what you get. So if I made the sign the basis of my expectation, I'd never eat another Whopper again! See how important expectations or the basis of our expectations are?

The same is true about God. It's important for us to base our expectations about God on truth and not our perceptions of the truth. We need to base it on the norm and not the exception.

When I first read the Bible I was captivated by all the miracles in it. I loved reading Kings and Chronicles and all the power miracles performed by Elijah and Elisha. I also loved reading about all the miracles performed by Jesus. These stories formed the basis for my expectations of God. I expected him to heal people more often than he does. I expected him to use people the way he used Elijah and Elisha. He healed tons of people back then! Why doesn't he do that now? He can! So why doesn't he?

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For a while that expectation I had of God caused me to become very disappointed with God at times. How many of you have felt that way or know people who do not believe in God because he does not live up to their expectations?

Where lies the problem? Not with God but with what we base our expectations on. Are we basing them on the extraordinary ways God acted or ordinary way God acted? Last week we talked about people's reaction to the gold calf fiasco. People read that and think to themselves: "*What were they thinking?*" With everything they saw, all the miraculous events, how could they ever doubt God or worship anything else but Him?

Let's talk about this. How many miracles did they see? I count 9 but three of them only Moses saw: the burning bush, the audible voice and the power signs in Exodus 4. They did see the ten plagues but you can easily explain them away through natural causes and Pharaoh did at first, which is why he did not let Israel go immediately.

They did walk out of Egypt without a single shot fired. That was miraculous. They saw the Red Sea open in front of them and then close behind them. I'd remember that one! They saw manna fall from heaven and quail, the water from the rock and the Sinai lighting up and God thundering! That's six confirmed miracles over a 90-day period. Most days nothing happened. 84/90 days God related to them in ordinary ways.

The same is true with the miracles of Jesus. Did you know that the Gospels only record 3.5 years of Jesus' life. Of those three years, if you add up the days recorded, it amounts to one year. That means 2/3 days of Jesus' ministry, nothing exceptional happened. They were ordinary days.

Imagine getting into a time machine and going back in time to witness a miracle but instead of landing on one of those days you landed on wash day. How disappointed would you be? Very! Why? Because we base our expectations of Jesus on the exception and not the norm and you can't do that. You have to base your expectations of others on the norm!

If you hit a home run in baseball and then expect to always hit one you'd be pretty disappointed with yourself! But you can't expect to hit a homerun every time. They are the exception and not the rule. The rule is you'll be lucky to get a hit out of 4 at bats!

So when it comes to God we have to base our expectation on the norm – how relates to us in everyday life. That's what we get here:

*"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. 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."*

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What was Israel's relationship with God like?

### I. It was Cloudy.

There were times when God gave clear direction, when his hand was obvious, but those didn't happen a lot in comparison to how God normally dwelled with them. God was more like a cloud: quiet, mirky, mysterious, intangible and unpredictable. Exodus 13:21 adds to this story. It says that God never let Israel see the cloud appear or disappear. He did that one time, on Sinai and never again! Most days the people got up not knowing if the cloud would be there or not. Every day they didn't know if they'd have water, if the manna would be there, if they'd be attacked again by the Amalekites or some other tribe or if the day would be peaceful and uneventful.

Every day they had reasons to be fearful, and anxious, reasons to forget about God's past faithfulness and future promises. Doesn't that describe our lives. Each day has it's own worries that cloud out the faithfulness of God and the promises of God!

When they looked for certainty, most days all they got was a cloud! God was clearly with them, but he was intangible, mirky, vague.

And that's what we get too, and we don't like it! We don't like vague! We don't want our loan officer to be vague about the mortgage payment. We don't want our teacher to be vague about what's on the test. We don't want our mechanic to be vague about the price or about what's wrong with our vehicle. We don't like our doctor to be vague about our diagnosis and prognosis.

Read the Exodus story again and look for how vague God was. He promises to deliver them but never tells them how. God never told Moses or Israel that he was going to bring ten plagues on Egypt. He revealed his plan one day at a time. He promised to take them to a land "flowing with milk and honey" but he never told them where it was: No address, no map, no timeline, no contract with a guarantee, no signed document! They had to take God at his word but that's not how we do business. You can't trust anyone's word for anything but that's what God expects of us. Even the process for leaving Egypt was left vague. No one was given a vote. Moses was told to go and ask Pharaoh to: "*Let my people go!*" Exodus 9:1 That was it!

God did verbally speak to his people but did so mainly to Moses. I count six occasions where God spoke to Israel, six times out of 90 days. That means God was mute 84 out of 90 days. God did promise to take them to the Promised Land but that came with a big "If." There was no guarantee. And the generation he made that promise to never entered it.

Every day they had to trust God would provide the manna. They were forbidden to stock up on food. God provided it "daily." The same was true with water. There were days when they went thirsty!

Even the terrain was uncertain. I walked the route Israel walked. It was very rough and rocky. You couldn't see far ahead. It twisted and turned. You don't see for miles. You can see at most 100-200 yards ahead and often just 10-20 feet ahead. You didn't know if an enemy was hiding behind the next hill or around the corner.

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The same thing is true about our lives. God knows the future, but he will not share it with us. He predicts the future but in very vague ways. Who can interpret the book of Revelation? It gives you signs and clues about how the end will unfold and who will win but how it will actually occur and when, is very unclear! In contrast to what some claim, Revelation does not provide a "tribulation map" for the end times. It's more like an impressionist painting. The picture is blurry. Why won't God let us see the future? Because *"We can't handle the future!"*

Life can be frustrating at times with God! Israel got frustrated with God's intangibility which is why they created the golden calf.

Isn't that how we feel? And isn't our walk with God much like Israel's walk with God. There are times when God's directions are clear, his hand evident, and he does some extraordinary things! But most often there are no bells and whistles. Nothing exciting happens. It's kind of blah. Our devotional times are ordinary, quiet, mirky. Life can feel uncertain. Jesus said not to worry because you can't add an hour to your life! You don't know if this is your last day or if you'll live to be 100!

When I was in college, I had the opportunity to apply for a summer mission trip to Israel but if I went there was a good possibility I wouldn't be able to get my paperwork in on time to get the scholarships and grants that I needed. I didn't have parents to rely on. I had to put myself through college.

So I prayed about it. I didn't get direction so I decided to go through that window, hoping that if God didn't want me to go he'd close it. I applied and was selected. I went to Israel and had a once in a lifetime experience. And while I was there Israel went to war, closed down all communication lines, closed the borders and we were stuck there and I could not call or send in my paperwork which meant I lost all my scholarships and grants. First week back I received a letter of expulsion for unpaid bills. On the one hand, I received what I thought was clear direction from God but now I found myself walking in a cloud with God! *"Really God? I go to a foreign country to share the love of Jesus to the Jews and that's how you reward me?"* It was a mirky time!

Just so you know, when the office of admissions heard my story and the story from our mission team they allowed me to stay and helped me get all my scholarships and grants back except for one. The deadline was past! But I made it through college and paid the last bill 6 months later! BUT I'm telling you I was pretty discouraged. It was mirky for months before I could see what God was up to. But that's what a walk with God is like!

Why doesn't God make walking with Him easier? Why can't it be all Red Sea moments? We know He's there but sometimes it's hard to get our hands on Him! And maybe that's the point He's making – You don't put your hands on God!

But that's what we want. We want a tangible God. We want certainty. We want to know which choice to make. We want to know what position to take on vital issues of our day. We don't like things being shrouded in mystery or nuanced. We want it in black and white. We want to be certain God is on our

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side or that we are on His side and to be certain of which side that is. We want to know nothing bad will happen to us or our loved ones. We want to know for sure we will come out of surgery fine.

I've always wondered what it was like fighting the battle of Jericho. Over and over again God told Joshua to be of courage. Jericho would be handed over to them. All they had to do was walk around the city for seven days and on the seventh day the walls would fall and they'd take the city. That's what God promised and they obeyed God and Israel took Jericho.

We know the story but to live it. I've always put myself in their shoes. What went through their minds when they blew the trumpets, the walls fell, and they turned to fight? It's what goes through every military person facing battle: *"I know there is a God and he's with me. But when I turn and face the enemy what will happen? Will we win? Will I win or will I die today? Is this my last day on earth?"* No one knows and no one knew then but they walked with God through that cloud anyway!

Life is exactly the way Paul described it: *"For we know in part and we prophesy in part...Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face."* 1 Corinthians 13:9, 12

Do you know where God placed that statement? In the chapter that is famously known as the (Wait for people's response) Love chapter! How is life in a cloud a loving thing? How is love and the lack of certainty connected?

You love your spouse, don't you? But isn't she a bit mysterious? Isn't he a bit mysterious? How many of you completely know your spouse? Like there is no mystery left. You know exactly what they think. You understand how they think! You know how they will react and feel about things? Anyone? No?? But you still love them? Why? Because mystery is adventurous. It's certainty, predictability, the same old tired thing that's dull! It's what kills a relationship. But, if things are unpredictable and has potential for all kinds of surprises, that makes life and relationships interesting and engaging. It's what makes God interesting and engaging. Every day is an adventure with him. Quoting a famous philosopher: *"Life is like a box of chocolates. You never know what you're going to get."*

I think another reason why God chooses to relate to us in vague, unpredictable ways is because it helps us grow. It stretches our faith and increases our ability to trust Him. *"For we walk (live) by faith, not by sight."* 2 Corinthians 5:7

By sight, what does God mean? The obvious one is physical sight. You can't see him and for many, seeing is believing. And sometimes God does let you see his hand but most often he asks you to trust him even though you don't see him!

There's emotional sight – the ability to feel God. Every spiritual leader that has walked this earth experienced what is known as *"the night of the soul"* – a period in their life when God withdrawal his presence so it isn't felt anymore. God is still there but you can't feel him. Why does he do that? So we learn how to walk by faith and not by our emotions.

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There is historical sight – the ability to see the promises of God or Word of God fulfilled in your life. In Hebrews 11 the writer lists the heroes of our faith. Some of the heroes saw the promises of God fulfilled in their life time: Enoch was taken up to heaven without dying. Noah built an ark and saw the flood God predicted. Sarah had a baby. Moses became the deliver God said he would become.

But others did not. Noah built the ark despite the fact he did not know what rain was. Up until the flood it never rained. God nourished the ground through underground springs. The three Hebrew guys were not certain God would save them from the furnace but they walked into that cloud anyway. Abraham never received the land God had promised. It says he saw it in his head but never with his eyes. The Twelve disciples followed Jesus though they had no idea what getting into that cloud would entail.

The Hebrew writer ends his tour of the faithful who entered the cloud with God, this way:

*“Some faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were put to death by stoning; they were sawed in two; they were killed by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated—the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, living in caves and in holes in the ground. These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised...”* Hebrews 11:36-39 Notice those who did not see God’s promises fulfilled were commended for having the same faith as those who did.

Then there’s directional sight – When God gives you clear direction. Sometimes he does but sometimes he doesn’t. Sometimes you have to just step out in faith hoping that you chose the right path. But what if you didn’t? That’s what paralyzes a lot of Christians. They won’t make a decision until God gives them clarity on which way to go but that’s not how God operates normally. Normally you have to walk into the cloud by faith! Most often he allows you to choose!

But what if I choose wrongly? I’ve got news for you. One, you’ve already made a lot of wrong choices in your life and see where you are today. People worry about the “perfect will of God” for their lives. There is no such thing. You blew that a long time ago!

Two, and you need to hear this one: *“God is bigger than your or my ability to pick the right path. Our God owns all the paths and he can use the wrong road to get you to the right place.”* Let that sink into your noodle and it’ll put you at peace. You still need to pray and seek God for direction but if he doesn’t give it, it means you need to walk by faith. Choose a road and he will use it to get you to the right place because He is Lord of all the roads!

Read the Exodus story. How many mistakes did they make? Yet they still walked out of Egypt and made it to the Promised Land. How many times did Jesus’ disciples pick the wrong road? Yet, they made it to Pentecost. Think about the Church. Jesus turned his Gospel ministry over to us. How many wrong roads has the Church gone down? A lot, yet just as Jesus said, the Gospel has and is going into all the world and the gates of hell have not prevailed and will not prevail!

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When you walk with this God sometimes you won't be certain of what to do, what choice to make. Sometimes you won't make the right decision. Sometimes you won't discern correctly. Sometimes God is going to leave things murky, uncertain, vague. Sometimes you won't feel anything. And you'll wonder if God has left you as an orphan.

He hasn't and he never will. He is with you. He's just growing your faith. That's what a walk with God is like. It is like entering into a cloud. It can be scary but it can also be an adventure. Walk by faith, not by sight and even if you do take the wrong road, he will still use it to get you to the right place.