

The Cloud of Presence

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[0 : 00] Now in both our Old Testament and our New Testament readings this evening, we have evidence of the presence of the cloud of God's symbolic presence with his people, whether in Israel of old or in the disciples upon the Mount of Transfiguration.

And it is self-evidently the case in Scripture that God frequently chooses to reveal himself to his people by means of a cloud to symbolize his divine presence.

Now we need not multiply examples unduly. We all know that the Lord chose to lead the children of Israel in the desert by means of a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.

So we see at the end of chapter 13 in Exodus there, they moved on from Succoth and encamped at Etham on the edge of the wilderness. And the Lord went before them by day in a pillar of clouds 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.

The pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night did not depart from before the people. And we know also, of course, that he descended upon Mount Sinai in a cloud, likewise, and that this cloud was sometimes light and bright and sometimes dark and fearful.

[1 : 27] In Exodus 19, we read at verse 9, And the Lord said to Moses, Behold, I am coming to you in a thick cloud that the people may hear when I speak with you and may also believe you forever.

And after the giving of the Ten Commandments, we read of how towards the end of chapter 20, we read that Moses went up. The people stood far off while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was.

Now why is there thick darkness in the middle of the day? It's because of the density and the darkness and fearfulness of the clouds. Sometimes it is light and bright.

Sometimes it is dark and terrifying. We know also that when the Lord returns, he will do so with clouds. You might think, oh, that's a wee bit sort of Victorian painting kind of thing.

Well, that's what the Bible says. And if God's infallible word says he will come with clouds, then that is what the truth is. And when he does so, his appearance will cause either rapturous joy or the wail of despair, depending on our relationship to him here and now in this fleeting veil of time.

[2 : 42] We read, for example, in 1 Thessalonians, we read of how when the Lord comes back, this is what it says, chapter 4, verses 16 and 17, for the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel and with the sound of the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ shall rise first.

Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. So we will always be with the Lord.

Therefore, encourage one another with these words. In Revelation, we read in chapter 1, verse 7, Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him.

Even so. Amen. So either there is going to be terrified wailing, or there is going to be joyful reunion with the Lord, depending on our relationship with him here and now in this fleeting veil of time.

So we know that the Lord consistently makes use of the cloud, both in the Old Testament and the New, as a symbol of his presence amongst men.

[4 : 05] We might ask, why? At the end of the day, we can only speculate. We can't say for certain. But there are lots of good reasons it could be. A cloud is something which, if you think about it, we perceive as being of the heavens.

We look up skywards, and we might see fluffy white clouds or big gray threatening rain clouds, but we associate the fact of clouds with the heavens, or at the very least with the sky, with something that is essentially heavenly.

And yet, it is inextricably bound up with Earth's atmosphere. Clouds don't appear in outer space. Not as we know them anyway. Things that look like clouds might be, whether it's some meteor showers or whatever. You don't have clouds in outer space. They are bound up with the Earth's atmosphere.

Of all the planets and stars in all the universe, God has chosen to do business with immortal souls only here. In this tiny and seemingly insignificant planet, in the vastness of all the universe, here and here alone, the Lord has chosen to do business with the souls of men.

[5 : 19] The Lord has created those souls and seeks to interact with them here and here alone. All the frantic and rather pitiful efforts of men to identify or prove the existence of life in other planets has always proved futile.

And it's not for the want of their trying. Clouds symbolize the Earth's atmosphere. Likewise, they symbolize from Earth, they symbolize the heavens to us.

This mixture of heaven and Earth, the divine and the earthly. Of course, we can extrapolate that. I mean, of course, God himself reveals himself both as that which is divine and that which is wholly human of the world as well in that sense.

Because he is God, only God and only man in the person of his sons. We could make a whole sermon out of that, but you'll be glad to know I'm not going to here. Clouds are composed of water moisture, something without which life on Earth cannot be sustained.

And similarly, without God's intervention, life could not exist even in its physical state, let alone any true spiritual life. And as the cloud empties itself, so it gives water and life to the Earth.

[6 : 40] And those places without clouds, without water, they wither and perish. They become deserts. They become places of death. So Christ emptied himself and took upon himself the form of a servant that he might give life where before there was only death.

A cloud then in and of itself symbolizes the interaction between heaven and Earth, like the moisture or even the gentle dew that settles on the ground in the morning.

Or the mist that was there at the beginning in Genesis before it had rained on the Earth. We read in chapter 2 of Genesis, remember verses 5 and 6, for the Lord God had not caused it to rain on the land.

And a mist was going up from the land and was watering the whole face of the ground. It is in gentleness that the Lord and giver of life comes upon the Earth.

He who has created the sun in all its fierce raging fire and for whom the sun is but a tiny little pinprick compared to the really big stars and planets that he has made elsewhere in the universe.

[7 : 52] This power that has created all these things comes to us not with raging judgment but in gentleness. Like the mist and like the dew of heaven.

It is in gentleness that the Lord and giver of life comes to the Earth to soften the hard hearts of men. Again, we could multiply instances or examples of why God might have chosen the cloud to symbolize his presence and how all these things do point to Christ and they do all symbolize God's presence but at the end of the day it can only be speculation as to why he may have chosen the cloud.

And we must simply say that this is what God has chosen to do. Just like we don't know why he loves us but he has chosen to do it. We don't know why he saves those whom he saves but he has chosen to do it.

So we don't know why it is a cloud that he uses but he has chosen to do it. Now both of our readings this evening involve the cloud of God's presence.

In the first instance we have the completion of the Temple of Solomon. The richest and most magnificent structure ever raised up to that point in honor of the God of Israel.

[9 : 12] All that man could do in the service and honor of God had been done. At the end of chapter 7 in 1 Kings we read Thus all the work that King Solomon did on the house of the Lord was finished.

Everything that had been ordered everything that had been designed it was completed. It was done. It was finished. They had reached the end of their accomplishments. And at the end of the day it is if we can say it in all sort of respect and honor it's essentially still an empty and lifeless structure.

A massive edifice of stone and wood and gold and silver but earthbound empty and lifeless until and unless God takes possession of it.

Stamps it with his authority and ownership and moves in permanently to dwell there. Now in this of course we have a picture of our salvation which like so much else in Christian doctrine is open to misinterpretation of people getting the wrong idea of how it is that we are saved.

We are dead and lifeless and essentially sterile until the Lord moves into our hearts and takes possession and stamps his authority upon our lives. We can again multiply examples and illustrations of that but it is open to misinterpretation of people getting the wrong idea of how it is that we are saved.

[10 : 45] false religion of all varieties whether it is religions that claim to be monotheistic or whether it is pure paganism or whatever false religion of all varieties longs for some kind of equality of collaboration between God and man.

Paganism for example is the idea that the heathen gods must be placated by sacrifice that if certain rituals or forms are gone through then all will be well.

When this is transposed into a Christian context the old folk religion idea finds expression in the likes of Romanism for example.

Without being highly critical of a different branch or expression of church we think in terms of if certain rites are fulfilled fortified by the rites of Holy Church certain works are accomplished the right prayers are said the right sacrifice is made and without being pejorative that is the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church with regard to the mass that it is a sacrifice it is the re-presentation of the sacrifice of Christ upon the cross it is not going through it again but it is re-presenting it again a sacrifice that if these things are done if these things are all gone through then similarly all that can be done has been done and God must in turn grant us our salvation now in a Protestant context of course this idea of works contributing to the accomplishment of our salvation is found in the doctrine known as Arminianism sounds a complicated word but the idea is of God and man together doing their bit in partnership to secure the salvation of the latter the salvation of man now such a passage as this of Solomon's temple might at first glance lend itself to such a misinterpretation one might say look man builds this magnificent temple he gives his best he does his bit he gives everything he can and now

God accepts ownership and he inhabits the temple and with each together sharing our work they secure God's blessing on man's effort man does his bit God does his bit and together we are happy ever after God is portrayed as somehow standing in need of man's preparations and efforts now one might see how such a misinterpretation might arise but it will not happen if the doctrine of biblical Christianity is followed whereby God is the center and soul of all things the universe is God created and God centered and the word of God is interpreted by reference to itself in other words if we are in doubt about the meaning or certainty of any part of scripture we solve the problem by searching the scriptures for passages which may speak more clearly so that in all cases it is God who speaks through his own word that is biblical

[14 : 15] Christianity it is God centered it is God honoring and it has God's ownership of it now what does Jesus say about the idea that man as God's servant might somehow be meriting God's blessing or forcing his hand to grant acceptance with him or salvation to his soul well we turn up Luke 17 and we see what Jesus says from verse 7 says will any one of you who has a servant plowing or keeping sheep say to him when he is coming from the field come at once and recline at table will he not rather say to him prepare supper for me and dress properly and serve me while I eat and drink and afterward you will eat and drink does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded so you also when you have done all that you were commanded say we are unworthy servants we have only done what was our duty this is what

Jesus says his disciples should understand in terms of their servant relationship to God we may be the most faithful and devout and dedicated servants of all but we are simply doing as it were our job in being faithful servants of God he has done everything we do not have the power to do anything Isaiah tells us our best works our righteousness are as filthy rags now in my previous references I am not slagging or denigrating the adherence of other religions or denominations I am simply identifying what it is that these religions teach and regardless of whether they have a Christian expression or those of a completely pagan expression false religion whatever face it wears is identified by the fact that it seeks to give man equal place with

God it is the oldest sin in the book remember what the serpent said to Eve you shall be as gods knowing good from evil you'll be right up there with them you'll be able to cooperate with them you'll have God's respect you will be equals it is the oldest sin in creation man is not God but God in love

and mercy redeems fallen man by that which God himself alone has done through his son upon the cross Jesus is under no illusions nor should his disciples be about the position of servants in relation to the master in the light of that then how should we understand the coming of the cloud of God's presence into the temple well I would suggest to you it is like we said before when man has reached the end of his accomplishments when he has learned by exhausted experience that he can do no more he can build a beautiful temple but at the end of the day it is still essentially an empty and lifeless structure a massive edifice of stone and wood and gold and silver earthbound empty and lifeless capable of being used for either

God honoring worship or pagan idolatry and remember it was used both ways even in Solomon's reign it wasn't just the later on kings of Judah and Israel who defiled the temple with pagan worship remember how we read of Solomon that in his old age it's so many wives and concubines and some of them were pagans and worshippers of false gods and for them he set up altars in the temple and he made little pagan shrines even in the temple itself he deferred to them he gave in to them even in the reign of Solomon that temple had begun to be used for pagan idolatry in and of itself it has no power or holiness except in so far as the Lord chooses to dwell there and if this temple has been constructed and offered to the

Lord it is still empty and sterile until the Lord takes possession of it what we find is we say it is used for both in Solomon's reign man when he has built the most beautiful temple the earth had ever seen to the true God the greatest God the earth had ever seen man can do nothing more nothing at all to command the presence of God to come or to go God needed no temple when he appeared in the pillar of cloud in the wilderness on a top Mount Sinai even the tabernacle built to his precise specifications he would inhabit only for as long as he saw fit and then the cloud would be up and out and the Israelites had to move again the cloud dictated Israel's movements not the other way around where

[20 : 02] God went before them in his symbolic presence they had to follow or be left behind to perish in the wilderness it is the same with us where the Lord leads we must follow even if we especially don't like it necessarily but where the Lord leads we cannot afford to be without him it is not he who follows meekly in our footsteps it is we who must follow where he leads and if man can do nothing before the symbolic presence of God appears self evidently he can do nothing afterwards we read in 1st Kings chapter 8 and verses 10 and 11 and when the priests came out of the holy place a cloud filled the house of the Lord so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud for the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord man cannot command

God's presence or absence by what he does himself beforehand he can't do a thing afterwards even the priests of the Lord cannot carry on the work of the Lord because the presence the cloud of God's presence so fills it they have to come out they cannot stay there because of the cloud of the glory of the Lord which filled the house of the Lord God graciously comes to man in his helplessness and our only right response like that of Solomon is to bow before him in humility and prayer but let us look also at our second reading we find in Matthew chapter 17 here we see the disciples on the mount of transfiguration and again Peter's natural desire which we read at verse 4 there Peter said to Jesus Lord it is good that we are here if you wish I will make three tents here one for you one for

Moses one for Elijah he's this desire this natural human desire of us to be able to do something to serve to help to somehow cause this vision of heaven to stay and remain with them but then they are overwhelmed by a bright cloud and a voice from the cloud now notice the difference in response when they see Moses and Elijah with Jesus it's wonder and delight and spellbound fascination they wanted to continue let's make three tabernacles here one for you one for Moses and Elijah let's keep this here if we can this wonderful vision this mountaintop experience literally let's keep it here let's get them to dwell here if we can they're excited they're spellbound they're fascinated but when the cloud overshadows them and God speaks through it though it be a bright cloud and not darkness and thunder as in Mount

Sinai what do we read at verse 6 this is what it says when the disciples heard this they fell on their faces and were terrified they're not terrified by Moses and Elijah they're not terrified by the fact that Jesus is seen there with them they're not terrified by the fact that here's this vision of the glorified souls of men they thought they were long dead Moses the personification of the law Elijah the personification of the prophets it's great but then the cloud overwhelms them and God speaks through it when the disciples heard this they fell on their faces and were terrified to sense the

presence of the living God is to fear but this is a good thing for it is said that when the Lord takes away his presence he takes away his fear those who fall away from the Lord those who want you know maybe they were once walking with the Lord but now you know they're kind of indifferent to it do we find them trembling in their boots every day about the fact that they've separated from the Lord do we find them sort of living in dread and terror that they're going to die tomorrow and they're going to die separated from the Lord no comparatively indifferent they're shrugging it off no they're not really bothered I don't really want to go back to church no the Bible well it's kind of boring and the Lord well that was okay for that phase of my life but now you know they don't have the fear of the Lord anymore when the Lord takes away his presence he takes away his fear so if we are still anxious and still concerned oh I'm not as close to the Lord as I should be and oh I'm so filled with sin and I want to be closer to the Lord then you should take courage from the fact if you still care the Lord has not departed from you altogether when the

[25 : 15] Lord takes away his presence he takes away his fear we mentioned Proverbs this morning chapter 1 verse 7 the feet of the feet of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge but fools despise wisdom and instruction and how in chapter 9 verse 10 it says the feet of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom and the knowledge of the holy is understanding always the feet of the Lord it's wise it's good it's healthy Psalm 19 tells us the feet of the Lord is clean enduring forever even to behold his angelic messengers is to fear you ever notice how whenever the angels appear to people in the Old Testament or in New it's one of the first things they have to say is fear not don't be afraid now if God doesn't waste any of his words why is that the first thing they have to say because the appearance of this supernatural angelic holy messenger causes mere mortals to be afraid if you happened to see something whether on the road or in your garden or the edge of your kitchen or whatever it might be and it was completely unlike anything you had ever set eyes on before you know we recognize most of the things whether animal vegetable or mineral in this world but if it was something completely unlike anything you'd ever seen before probably your first reaction would not be idle curiosity it would be fear what is this thing why is it in my house or in my garden or at the side of the road why is it here what does it mean no what's it want with me and if an angelic being appears before you then of course you will be afraid and that is why the angels almost always begin whatever they're going to say to the

Lord's servants so faithful people they begin by saying fear not or words to that effect don't be afraid and if you look through scripture that is the case time and time again it's the first thing they have to say because the appearance of God's angelic messengers coming as they do with God's message and divine authority although they don't have any divine initiative they come with his divine authority it causes us mere mortals to be afraid and so it should that is a healthy and good thing on the mount as elsewhere the cloud of God's holy presence overwhelms and overpowers man's feeble but well meaning efforts at somehow benefiting God or his glorified servants Peter may think it's a great idea to build three tabernacles for Moses and Elijah and Jesus but nobody has the idea what a great idea to build three tents for this massive cloud this bright cloud of God's presence oh yeah let's make tents no they don't even think of that they are flat on their faces terrified before the presence of the living God but friends this helplessness before God is good news it is if nothing else a wondrous leveler this our utter helplessness this our seeing as for the first time our own filthiness and earthbound sinfulness in comparison with that perfect bright holiness our need for repentance brings all mankind to the same level before

God prostrate flat on our faces trembling in helplessness before him each and every human being is a hell deserving sinner overpowered by the fearful sense of the presence of God and knowing at last our need for repentance and that is not just a felt need within it is commanded by God remember what Paul says to the Athenians in Acts 17 we read in verse 29 being then God's offspring we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone an image formed by the art and imagination of man the times of ignorance God overlooked but now he commands all people everywhere to repent now he commands all people everywhere to repent because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead all men everywhere whether it's more in a minute runaway slaves in the wilderness or temple building kings of unsurpassed wisdom or the apostles of

Christ themselves all are hell deserving sinners all helpless before this mighty God and before the cloud of his presence this is good news for sinners because we all then know where we stand what

did the apostles do in the face of the presence of God the cloud of God's presence when the disciples heard this they fell on their faces and were terrified they are flat on their faces in desperate prayer before the Lord and likewise we read of Solomon Solomon bowed himself in prayer and he stood before the altar and he offered up the sacrifices and as he prayed bowing himself before the Lord he sought to intercede for all his nation all his kingdom because he knew as they knew or would soon come to know that they were as nothing before this great

God and that is the case of all of us in this world none of us has any power or strength of ourselves none of us has any righteousness of ourselves whether it is Solomon whether it is the apostles whether it's the runaway slaves in the wilderness whether it's us we are all in the same boat before God we are not righteous in his sight but my goodness he is righteous and he is holy and he is for sinners because we all know where we stand what then should we do each day each new beginning each Lord's day day of the beginning of a new week ought to be a day of a fresh start of repentance before God and receiving of his grace yes there is a measure of self abasement before the

[32 : 50] Lord and that's only as it should be Peter tells us in 1st Peter chapter 5 and verse 6 he says humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God not so that you can be ground down into the dirt that you have to grovel forever in the mud but rather humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you he'll be lifted up because to know our place before God that we are as nothing but he is almighty and all holy this is how we learn wisdom because we grasp reality and everybody else that doesn't grasp this in all truthfulness isn't living in the real world they're living in an imagined world where they think they're the supreme pinnacle of all that has so-called evolved they're looking in a world where God is not in it and that's not real that is not reality it is our vain imagination if you're not living in the real world then you cannot say that you're wise we have become foolish in our separation from

God but the Lord says through Peter humble yourselves therefore unto the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you but what does he go on to say let's follow on the next verses casting all your anxieties or cares upon him because he cares for you be sober minded be watchful your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion seeking whom to devour resist him firm in your faith knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world resist the devil as James tells us submit to God humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God submit to God resist the devil and he will flee from you because once he knows that you know the reality of this world as it truly is where it is filled with the presence of the

Lord and filled with the free offer of his salvation once you know something you cannot unknow it and he knows that once a soul knows the truth of Christ yes he can tempt them away and yes he can encourage them to fall away but he can never make them unknow it and it is that much harder for the devil to do his evil work once you know Christ and as the apostles have this cloud of God's presence revealed to them yes they humble themselves under the mighty hand of God lay aside all your efforts and achievements whatever it is that you think they may be equally because this is such a leveler you can lay aside all your feelings of failure that's what causes you to be troubled all your feelings of helplessness because if you think well I'm helpless I'm useless I'm nothing that's what everybody else is the highest achiever the most powerful billionaire kings presidents the greatest men that have ever lived in this world the most powerful women that have ever influenced anything they are at exactly the same level before God humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God and you've begun to know wisdom you've begun to know the truth which all these billionaires and powerful politicians some of them perhaps will never know they think they are powerful they can be snuffed out in a moment people say of the vice presidents of the United States that they are a heartbeat away from the biggest job in the world and what that means is if the president's heart for one moment doesn't take its next beat if it just stops suddenly beat the vice president gets the top job that can happen to any of us at any time we simply don't draw the next breath and that's it remember the man who had amassed so much wealth in Luke's account of the gospel and Jesus told the story his land brought forth abundantly what will I do I'll pull down my barns and build bigger ones and I'll say to my soul soul there was much goods laid up for many years take thy knees eat drink and be merry but God said to him thou fool this night thy soul shall be required of thee then whose shall these things be which thou hast laid up for thyself where is all the millions of the billionaire where is all the power of the politician where is all the grandeur of

presidents where is all the abilities of the high achievers unless it be laid down before the Lord in the dust unless we cast our crowns before him we haven't even begun to learn what it is to be wise and to grow and to become the men and women that the

Lord has designed us to be lay aside all your achievements lay aside all your failures all your anxieties all your burdens lay them down come unto me all you at labor and are heavy laden says the Lord and I will give you rest be metaphorically speaking be the empty tabernacle ready to be filled be that temple of the holy ghost that God designed men and women to be we read in 1 Corinthians 3 verses 16 and 17 do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's spirit dwells in you if anyone destroys God's temple God will destroy him for God's temple is holy and you are that temple 2 Corinthians 6 16 what agreement has the temple of God with idols for we are the temple of the living God as God said I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them and I will be their

[39 : 05] God and they shall be my people be that empty temple be that tabernacle ready to receive the cloud of God's presence shrink down humble yourselves and give God place and give him space an opportunity to fill you to surround you to envelope you and enfold you with that yes now unseen but nevertheless real cloud of his presence which is bright and glorious and fearful and which always always points points us to his son we read he was still speaking when behold a bright cloud overshadowed them and a voice from the cloud said this is my beloved son with whom I am well pleased listen to him when the disciples heard this they fell on their faces and were terrified but Jesus came and touched them saying rise and have no fear and when they lifted up their eyes they saw no one but Jesus only let us pray