

God's Presence among His People

Numbers 9:15–23

If you have lived any length of time on this earth, you know that life doesn't always turn out the way we plan. When we're young, we have high hopes about living the best life ever. We see the mistakes that other people make, but with youthful enthusiasm we are optimistic that *we* will do better. Later in life we look back, and no, our happily-ever-after dreams did not all come true. Yet our faith teaches us that *God* knows the future—and knows it perfectly. Nothing ever takes him off guard or by surprise. He continues, as always, to work out *everything* after the counsel of his perfect will. And we can have the confidence “that the eternal Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who of nothing made heaven and earth with all that is in them, who . . . upholds and governs the same by His eternal counsel and providence, is for the sake of Christ His Son *my* God and *my* Father; in whom I so trust as to have no doubt that He will provide me with all things necessary for body and soul; and further, that whatever evil He sends upon me in this vale of tears, He *will* turn to my good; for He is able to do it, being almighty God, and willing also, being a faithful Father.”¹

Yes, God is a faithful Father. He has a special relationship with his covenant people. If you are a worshiper and disciple of Jesus Christ, you don't need to fear the future. You can concentrate on living a life of obedience and leave the running of the universe to him! As Paul says, “Don't worry about *anything*, but in *everything*, through prayer and petition with thanksgiving, present your requests to God” (Phil. 4:6).²

I have three points this morning: (1) An identifiable sign of his presence, (2) An indelible mark of authenticity, and (3) An eternal promise of belonging and empowering. First,

1. An identifiable sign of his presence

It has now been one year since God miraculously delivered his people out of Egypt. He led them to Sinai, where he spoke from heaven and gave them his law. Israel camped around the base of the mountain and waited while the tabernacle and the ark of the covenant were being constructed. Now, the formal tabernacle-worship of God has begun. The priests are offering sacrifices, and the Passover has been observed. Now, God speaks through his prophet Moses concerning his plans for his people during the next thirty-nine years of their wandering in the wilderness before they reach the Promised Land.

Our text today begins: “Now on the day that the tabernacle was raised up, the *cloud* covered the tabernacle, the tent of the Testimony.” Here is a reference to a

¹ Christian Reformed *Psalter Hymnal* (1959), Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 9; back matter, p. 26, emphasis added

² Christian Standard Bible

“cloud.” We could easily miss the significance of this. We see clouds all the time. The other day, when I went on my morning walk, there was a deep blue sky and the sun was shining. Then the clouds started rolling in, and within an hour it was mostly cloudy. We love the blue sky; it is so cheery. But we know that we need rain too. If we don’t get enough rain, everything will dry out and crops will suffer. Sometimes we pray for rain.

But don’t just skip past this reference to “the cloud.” Notice that it has the definite article: “*the* cloud.” This is no ordinary cloud! The people had seen it before. This is a reference to the glory-cloud.³ According to the Hebrew lexicons, this particular cloud is referenced some 58 times in the Old Testament. The first time we see it is in Exodus 13. The people have just left Egypt. God chose not to lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was the shorter route. His perfect will for his people was to train them by taking them through the wilderness. When they were right on the edge of the wilderness we read that “the LORD went before them by day in a *pillar of cloud* to lead the way, and by night in a *pillar of fire* to give them light, so as to go by day and night. He did not take away the *pillar of cloud* by day or the *pillar of fire* by night from before the people.” In that text, the purpose of the glory-cloud is expressly stated: “The LORD went before them by day in a pillar of cloud *to lead the way*” (Ex. 13:21). The LORD—note God’s covenant name—was giving his solemn promise to his people to lead them every step of the way to the Promised Land. Until just days before, they had been slave-laborers. They had never been outside the land of Egypt. They had never been taught to think for themselves. Their whole life was doing what they were told and avoiding the taskmasters’ whip. And now, here they are, a great throng of two-and-a-half million souls, on the edge of a great wilderness. They had never been that way before. They hadn’t the slightest idea where they were going, *but God knew!* And this God appeared to them in a special cloud. It had a distinctive shape. It was not an amorphous mass. It was shaped like a pillar, standing up over the ground, pointing to the sky. As the Psalmist would express it, “Our soul is escaped as a bird out of the snare of the fowlers: the snare is broken, and we are escaped. Our help is in the name of the LORD, who made heaven and earth.”⁴ The souls of God’s people had clean escaped as a bird in the snare of the fowlers. Who would lead them through the great wilderness? The LORD who made heaven and earth would be their leader and defender! And so it is in every generation. Blessed are the people who learn this lesson.

The glory-cloud not only had a distinctive shape, it also had a distinctive appearance. It could look dark against a light sky and fiery bright against a dark

³ A “cloud-mass: . . . especially of theophanic cloud” (Brown Driver Briggs Lexicon (Logos Bible Software): עָנָן. “Theophanic” means: *revealing God*.

⁴ Ps. 124:7–8

sky. When Pharaoh, who had begged them to leave his land, later changed his mind and sent his armies after them to trap them at the shore of the Red Sea, we read that “the Angel of God, who went before the camp of Israel, moved and went behind them; and the *pillar of cloud* went from before them and stood behind them. So it came between the camp of the Egyptians and the camp of Israel. Thus *it was a cloud and darkness to the one, and it gave light by night to the other*, so that the one did not come near the other all that night.”⁵ Clearly, this was no ordinary cloud! This was a miraculous cloud that would follow God’s people throughout the Old Testament, reassuring them of his presence. When the tabernacle was finished, “the *cloud* of the LORD was above the tabernacle by day, and fire was over it by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel” (Ex. 40:38).

In Leviticus 16:2, Moses is told to speak to his brother Aaron, the high priest, and warn him not to come at just any time into the Most Holy Place⁶ inside the veil, before the mercy seat, as God says, “lest he die; for I will appear *in the cloud* above the mercy seat.” He could go into the Holy of holies only once a year, on the Day of Atonement.

From this time on, the glory-cloud is attached to the tabernacle. In our text this morning we read that “on the day that the tabernacle was raised up, the cloud covered the tabernacle, the tent of the Testimony.” “*The cloud*” is no ordinary cloud; it is the glory-cloud.⁷ Here is an identifiable sign of God’s presence, visible to all the people of Israel. Likely the glory-cloud was a topic of conversation throughout all the camp of Israel. By it God will lead his people into the Promised Land. In 1 Kings 8, when the temple is built, we read that “the *glory* of the LORD . . . filled the house of the LORD.” God would continue to be with his faithful people. And the most exciting thing of all? He continues to be with us as well! We read in John 1:14, “And the Word was made flesh, and *dwelt* among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.” The word for “dwelt” means *tabernacled*. In Christ, God himself *tabernacles* among his people.

Listen well: From the time of Moses on to the present day, God dwells among his people. This is unique. He dwells among no other people on earth—only among his covenant people. And he promises to lead us. “For as many as are *led* by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God” (Rom. 8:14).

The glory-cloud was a visible, identifiable sign of God’s presence, but we have something greater: the presence of Christ in our midst. We don’t have the glory-cloud, as impressive as that was, but we have the personal presence of Christ to

⁵ Ex. 14:19–20

⁶ Lev. 16:2 has “Holy Place,” but clearly the Most Holy Place, the Holy of holies, is meant in context. Matthew Poole observes that “the positive degree put for the comparative, which is not unusual in Scripture” (Commentary).

⁷ Called in later extra-biblical literature the “Shekinah glory” (from שְׁכִינָה *shākan*, meaning *dwelt*). The Shekinah glory is visible where God *dwells*.

bless and lead his people. How do we know? Not from something we can observe with our eyes, but from the Holy Scriptures. Jesus says, “Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (Matt. 18:20). When the church assembles on the Lord’s Day at the command of Christ, to hear his Word proclaimed and to sing his praises, the living, ascended Christ is present with us. You don’t get this in a political party, community group or on social media. You get it only in a faithful, Bible-believing church that holds to the “one Lord, one faith, one baptism.”⁸

We live in a world where things do not always go according to our plan. We need a sure guide. That guide is the presence of God in the midst of his church. God led his people through the great wilderness at the time of Moses, and he still leads his faithful people today.

2. An indelible mark of authenticity

There is a recurring phrase in our text today: “at the command of the LORD.” You will notice that “at the command of the LORD” occurs seven times exactly. Seven in the Bible the number of perfection. It is the number of the creation week and the weekly Sabbath. Think also of the seven churches, seven seals and seven plagues in the book of Revelation. Observe the phrase “at the command of the LORD” seven times in our text today. This is the standard translation of this phrase, but the Hebrew is more cryptic. It is literally “at the *mouth* of the LORD.” “Mouth” here stands for *command*. This command either to camp or to move on was as authoritative as if every Israelite had heard it uttered by God’s very voice in his own ears. We have the phrase “at the command [mouth] of the LORD” twice in verse 18, twice again in verse 20, and *three* times in verse 23. This is intentional. The Holy Spirit inspired the prophet Moses to write these words.

Note especially verse 23. Speaking of Israel, it says, “At the *command* of the LORD they remained encamped, and at the *command* of the LORD they journeyed; they kept the charge of the LORD, at the *command* of the LORD by the hand of Moses.” The final clause, “at the command of the LORD by the hand of Moses” is very striking in the original: עַל־פִּי יְהוָה בְּיַד־מֹשֶׁה. Literally “at the *mouth* of the LORD by the *hand* of Moses.” There is a certain irony here. Remember, the God of the Bible is a pure Spirit; he does not have literal body parts; he doesn’t have a physical *mouth*! Yet seven times the original speaks of “the mouth of the LORD”! Furthermore, we have the phrase “by the *hand* of Moses.” (Some translations simplify it to read: “*through* Moses.”)

God doesn’t have a physical mouth, yet the text says, “at the *mouth* of the LORD they remained encamped, and at the *mouth* of the LORD they journeyed.”

⁸ Eph. 4:5. Groups that reject the one Lord; the one, apostolic faith; or the one baptism are not part of the church.

Then the text continues: “by the *hand* of Moses.” This is ironic. Moses surely did not tell the people God’s words using sign language!

Actually, the expression “by the hand of” is a common one in Hebrew. Here it means *by the agency* or *instrumentality* of Moses. Moses was God’s prophet. When the people, terrified at having heard God’s booming voice over Sinai, told him, “*You* speak with us, and we will hear; but let not *God* speak with us, lest we die,” they were asking Moses to be their go-between—their *mediator*. From that time on God declared his will to Moses, and Moses passed it on to the people. Essentially, God declared his Word to his people by the instrumentality of his prophet Moses. Moses was God’s instrument to deliver his message to the people. We cannot be saved without a mediator. Sinners cannot stand before a holy God apart from Christ. The only way for you to be saved is to come to God through Christ.

So here in the original Hebrew we have a sevenfold repetition of the phrase “at the mouth of the LORD.” This is God’s signature, as it were, assuring his people of the authenticity of his Word. In the art world, an artist will typically sign his work. There will be a characteristic signature identifying the work of a particular artist as genuine. Perhaps the signature will be prominent, or perhaps it will be disguised. Of course, a signature can be forged. An expert appraiser will give reasons why a particular work is genuine or not.

Brothers and sisters, the natural world around us has God’s signature! “The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament *showeth* his handiwork” (Ps. 19:1). Yes, the natural world shows the indelible mark of the Creator! No mere man can make something out of nothing. It is impossible. This is something the evolutionist cannot explain: Where did matter come from? If he were to protest that matter is *eternal*, then the logical follow-up is: “Prove it!” The Christian doesn’t have this problem, for the Bible clearly teaches that the God who *is*, *spoke* the creation into existence. He said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. Matter has existence because the Creator spoke his powerful, life-defining word, and the universe came into existence, fully formed, and with all systems working together in perfect synergy. The creation is both beautiful and functional. The trees of the Garden were both pleasant to the eye and good for food. This did not come about by chance; it bears the indelible signature of the Master Creator.

There are those who surmise that certain parts of the Bible have more authority than others: the words of Christ carry more authority than other parts of Scripture, or the New Testament carries more authority than the Old. But this actually undermines the authority of Scripture and makes *man* the arbiter of what is truly important and what is not.

But the bottom line for us is this: Numbers is *God’s Word*, not just human opinion. God delivered it through the instrumentality of Moses. He expressed his will to Moses, and Moses wrote it down. It is *God’s Word*. Man doesn’t have the

right to *change* it. Man doesn't have the right to *ignore* it. You ignores it at your eternal peril! If *anything* is more important to you than God's holy Word, then you are in serious trouble. His Word has an indelible mark of authority.

3. An eternal promise of belonging and empowering

I came across an article this week by a minister in the United Reformed Churches, Daniel Hyde, entitled "Chasing a Feeling, Missing a Face."⁹ Hyde speaks of people who attend worship, hoping to experience an emotional rush. If they feel encouraged or uplifted, then they feel that God was present. If they don't feel an emotional high, then they are disappointed. Worship was not as exciting as they hoped.

God did not intend his people to look for exciting worship. Rather, he promised to be spiritually present in churches where the Word of God is faithfully preached, the sacraments are properly administered, and discipline is practiced. Hyde remarks: "The remedy is not more intensity. It is learning to speak about God's presence the way God does." That is exactly the message of our text this morning. God is present with his people as they worship in Spirit and truth. The Christian's job is not to look for excitement, but to attend to the means of grace.

I remember a dear lady who attended this church many years ago. Eventually she left here for another church that had more "zippy" music that was to her liking. Choosing a church because it sings "your" music betrays a *man*-centered, rather than a *God*-centered, focus. The Bible teaches that whatever we do, we are to do it to the glory of *God*. We should intentionally seek out a church that is *God*-centered! *God* is the one who should be pleased with our worship. At the final day he's not going to ask us why our services weren't more *man*-centered, he's going to ask us why they weren't more *God*-centered!

Some people equate a high level of emotionalism or fervor with the Spirit's working. According to Hyde, that is like summoning a God who is otherwise *absent*: "If we say the right words, sing the right songs, play the right instruments, and stir up the right mood, then maybe he will come. But this gets it backward. God has promised to be present with his people when they gather. We do not conjure him. He is already there, awaiting us in the power of his Word and Spirit."

Indeed, God's people *ought* to pray earnestly for God's blessing on his worship: We pray with the Psalmist, "God be merciful unto us, and bless us; and *cause his face to shine upon us*." "Turn us again, O LORD God of hosts, *cause thy face to shine*; and we shall be saved."¹⁰ The Psalmist is not talking about a high level of emotion. God's face shines in the truth of his preached Word, as his people encounter and profit from his truth in the preaching of his Word. Contrariwise, for

⁹ <https://heidelblog.net/2026/08/chasing-a-feeling-missing-a-face-why-i-wrote-a-christians-pocket-guide-to-the-presence-of-god/> (accessed 8-13-26)

¹⁰ Ps. 67:1; 80:19 (cf. 80:3, 7)

God to turn his face *against* a people is for them to be left in the darkness of ignorance, error or deception. “For this cause God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie.”¹¹ This is God’s judicial abandonment of a people who are not seeking *him*, but instead seeking a religious high.

In the church we “gather with other believers expecting to meet with God, to hear his voice, to pray in dependence on the Spirit, to receive the assurance of the sacraments, and to be loved by his people.” Christian preaching introduces us to “the living God who has drawn near in Jesus Christ and promised to be with [us] always, to the end of the age. He already came. He is here. And in Christ, his nearness has a face.”¹²

The storyline of the Bible teaches us that God is with his people to bless us and empower us to serve him. That is true for us in an even more profound way than it was true for God’s people under the old covenant. God is with us! Christian, be encouraged! Amen.

¹¹ 2 Thess. 2:11

¹² Ibid.