

“REVIVE #2: CLOUD AND FIRE”

(Exodus 13:20-22)

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[Cornerstone UMC.; 9-10-23]

--[I--

1. [11am ONLY... Read CEB Text: Exodus 13:20-22 and Pray].

2. Last week we began a new series called **REVIVE**, in which we’re using the story of Israel’s exodus from Egypt to teach us lessons about what it takes for us to experience personal and corporate revival -- for us (like the Hebrews eventually did) to claim our own “promised land.”

A--We talked about how this kind of revival will first require us to answer God’s call for our future, just as Moses did when he responded to God's call from the burning bush.

B--Well, today's lesson moves us significantly forward in the exodus timeline, happening shortly after the Hebrew people have left Egypt, are being pursued by Pharaoh's army, and have begun their wilderness wanderings.

C--We find them tired and worn out by their journey, and stressed by the knowledge that their enemies are at their heels, dogging their every step.

3. Yet, in the midst of these challenges, today's story in Exodus 13:20-22 offers a gift of hope, renewal, and revival.

A--[9am ONLY...Listen to its words, “*20 They set out from Succoth and camped at Etham on the edge of the desert. 21 The Lord went in front of them during the day in a column of cloud to guide them and at night in a column of lightning to give them light. This way they could travel during the day and at night. 22 The column of cloud during the day and the column of lightning at night never left its place in front of the people.*”]

B--Here, in the midst of the people's exhaustion, stress, and fear, we find God giving them two tangible signs of His constant presence with and among them: a “*column of cloud*” by day; and a “*column of lightning*” by night.

(NOTE: Other translations more famously name these a “*pillar of cloud by day*” and “*a pillar of fire by night.*”)]

4. Well, the word “*cloud*” in the Hebrew language literally means “*covering*” (a reference to how the clouds “cover” the sky ¹), & in scripture, “cloud”, along with the word “fire” (as we learned in last week's sermon) were always references to God's Divine *presence*.

A--Now we don't really know exactly *what* these “columns/pillars” actually *were*.

1--Some have suggested that they were simply *natural* phenomena that ended up getting explained *spiritually*,...²

2--...While others are emphatic that they are literal miracles from God.

B--But to fixate on what they *were* again misses the point of what they *represented* -- this is, after all, a story *not* meant to explain the pillars of cloud & fire *rationaly*, but instead to emphasize *God's* continual guidance, protection, and *presence* as the Hebrews made their journey to the Promised Land. ³

C--The cloud and fire were simply *tangible, visual reminders* to the people that *God was with them*, and that they therefore didn't need to fear either the FUTURE (i.e., the *unknown*), the PRESENT (i.e., the "wilderness" they were *currently* in), or the PAST (i.e., the "known" oppression of the Egyptians).

--II--

5. Well, in a lot of ways, I think this Bible story can be a metaphor, of sorts, for where many of us spiritually and emotionally are today, both as individuals and even as a church.

A--Think about it: for various reasons, over the last 3-4 years, many of us have experienced our own forms of "exodus" from "the way we've always done things", leaving behind some forms & methods of life, ⁴ & even friends we've had in the past.

B--Like the Hebrews being chased by Pharaoh's army we, too, have been chased by various types of "enemies": financial struggles; health issues; marriage & relationship challenges; church-splits; fear of the future; and so on.

C--And for many of us, our journey out of Egypt (the past) towards a new "promised land" (the future) has *first* taken us into a spiritual and emotional "wilderness" (the present) where we feel tired, stressed, fearful, & perhaps even burned out by all that we're doing and experiencing.

6. Yet, just as God provided the Hebrews reminders of His presence by way of the pillars of cloud and lightning/fire, so I believe He provides us with our *own* reminders of His presence through *our* personal and corporate "wilderness wanderings," as well.

A--Oh, we may not experience these as pillars of cloud or fire like they did, but I believe that God tailors these reminders of His presence to things that best make sense *to us*.

B--And how do I know this? Well, Bible translators have pointed out that in ancient Hebrew, the "pillar of cloud" and "pillar of fire" in this story are NOT, in fact, two *separate* things, but simply two manifestations of ONE thing -- the cloud and the fire being merely *two aspects of the same pillar*. ⁵

C--In other words, *both* the cloud and fire represent God's *presence*, but they do so in a way that best suits the needs of the *situation*: during the day, the Hebrews needed a cloud remind them of God's overarching presence; at night, that presence took the form of fire so they could see.

D--And for me, this is a subtle reminder that God's presence in each of our lives is uniquely tailored for US -- He makes His presence known to each of us in a way that best makes sense of *our* specific, unique situations and needs.

1--Just because God appears or talks to your spouse, friend, neighbor, or church-mate in a *certain* way *doesn't* mean He'll appear to *you* in that *same* way.

2--No. God tailors the "God-sightings" and God-signs of His presence to *each* of us in ways that best make sense to *us*.

3--In my life, for example, I see and experience God best in the joy I get from time with my family, from hearing and singing beautiful music, and in the heavens and stars I see at night when I go stargazing.

4--Those are MY "pillars of cloud and fire". So, what are yours? What are the *unique* ways that *you* are reminded of God's power and presence in your life?

7. And just as the cloud and fire were specific reminders for the people of Israel that God was with *them*, giving them freedom from fear of the past, present, and future, so the unique God-signs/sightings of *our* lives function in the same way: they remind us that we don't need to fear either the oppressive things from our PAST ⁶, the "wilderness" things of our PRESENT, or the unknown things of our FUTURE. ⁷

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8. A few years back, a writer for The Upper Room devotional guidebook told the story about their son and daughter being in a serious accident while on a bus traveling to a youth retreat. A phone call had come to the writer telling about the accident, and mentioning that a young boy had been killed and several others seriously injured. But no names were mentioned in the call, though.

A--So when the writer arrived where the teens had been taken, while his heart grieved for the family of the lost boy, he was relieved to find both his son & daughter okay, with only minor injuries. His daughter, though, was so shaken up that she immediately ran into his arms sobbing, saying she'd "never ride in a car again." But the writer nevertheless got her in *his* car, and they all started to head back home.

On the way, the writer said that he turned around and noticed his son sleeping in the back seat, and his daughter softly singing to herself. So he asked her, "*Honey, how is it that you are not only in a car, but singing?*" Her answer was simple, "*Daddy, YOU'RE the one who's driving now.*" ⁸

B--I don't know what it is that you are facing that may be causing exhaustion, stress or fear or stress in your life right now.

1--Like the Hebrews in this story, maybe its fear of the unknown future, or fear of change in the present, or even fear of the past coming back to haunt you.

2--Maybe it's fear of losing a loved one, or challenges in a relationship, or in your job, or your health, or fear of your church changing.

C--Whatever it is, though, if we're truly a person of faith, then we need to remember that our Daddy (God) is in the driver's seat of our life, and we *don't* need to be afraid! ⁹

D--In the words of Verse 2 of the famous hymn by Katharina von Schlegel:

*"Be still, my soul: your God will undertake to guide the future as in ages past.
Your hope, your confidence let nothing shake;
All now mysterious shall be bright at last.
Be still, my soul: the waves and winds still know
The Christ who ruled them while he dwelt below."* ¹⁰

9. In today's Bible story, you see, the Hebrews found rest, renewal and revival when they chose to trust in God's continual *presence* throughout their journey.

A--Whatever they faced, the columns of cloud and fire reminded them to trust that God would be before and behind them to give us guidance, comfort, and protection.

B--And in OUR life's journey(-ies), the same can happen for us: when we trust that God's presence is *with* us no matter *what* we face, then we (like them) can find rest, renewal, and revival for our souls as we journey towards the "promised lands" to which God has called us.

10. [PRAYER: *"O God, there are many things that cause us fear and anxiety in our lives today: the mistakes of our past, the "wildernesses" of our present, and the unknowns of our future. And these fears and anxieties are often the source of much of our stress, exhaustion, & burn out. Yet, as today's Bible story reminds us, we can always trust you to be with us to give us signs of hope, presence, guidance, and renewal. So, Holy Spirit, give us spiritual eyes to see signs of the power and presence of God around us, so that we will be energized and renewed to stay the course when we are tired, worn out, and/or fearful. And let us always be mindful of how you can bring us renewal and revival when we find strength in your constant presence before us, beside us, behind us, above and beneath us. We pray all of this in the name of Jesus, our living 'pillar of cloud and fire' for our lives, Amen."*]

11. [11am SUGGESTED Closing Hymn UMH#534: "Be Still, My Soul"]

ENDNOTES:

¹ "Cloud" as "covering", as clouds "cover" the sky (Easton's Bible Dictionary). Read also Exodus 16:10; 33:9 Numbers 11:25; 12:5 Job 22:14; Psalm 18:11.

² For example, some have theorized that these things were simply formed by a uniquely shaped cloud bank, or by the cloudy spine of an active volcano.

³ So, for example, in today's scripture it says that the columns of cloud and lightening were constantly "*in front of the people*", which is an obvious reference to their *guiding* function (to show God's people which way to go). This function is again highlighted in Numbers 9:15-23. But if we fast forward just a bit (to Ch. 14:19-20), we also find the cloud and lightning moving to the *rear*, taking up a place *between* Israel & the Egyptians who were pursuing them -- which highlights their *protective/salvation* function. See generally, J. Pederson, "Pillar of Fire and of Cloud," Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible (Volume 3, p. 817). Also Mike Mitchell, "Pillar," Holman Bible Dictionary, and the article "Cloud" in Eastman Bible Dictionary.

⁴ For example, not many people had heard of, or used the online interaction platform "Zoom" before the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, that and other platforms like it are standard today.

⁵ The wording in Hebrew corroborates this: "pillar of cloud" is "*ammudh 'anan*" in Hebrew; and "pillar of fire" is "*ammudh 'esh*" = עַמֻּדָה עָנָן 'ammudh 'anan, עַמֻּדָה אֵשׁ 'ammudh 'esh ("pillar of cloud" and "pillar of fire"). They are simply *two* derivatives of the *same phrase*. From the New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible article "*Pillar of Cloud (and fire)*".

⁶ Such as our addictions, broken relationships, and the mistakes we've made.

⁷ Dr. Michael Yousef, Pastor of the Church of the Apostles in Atlanta, once said that "*The HAND of God will never lead you where the GRACE of God is not already with you*" (Heard on Christian radio station WVFJ, 91.7 FM).

⁸ Taken from an article in "Upper Room" devotional guide (May 1991), author from SE Asia.

⁹ Read 1 John 4:18 ("*Perfect love casts out fear*"). The Bible contains many other examples where God's people are implored to remember His protection and presence in the *past* as a way find renewal and revival in the *present* and into the *future*.

¹⁰ Lyrics to Verse #2 of "*Be Still, My Soul*" in the United Methodist Hymnal #534.