

# Shekinah

Numbers 9:15-23

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The nation of Israel is unique - always has been, always will be. In the ninth chapter of Romans Paul enumerates some of the distinctives which set this nation apart from the other nations of earth. One of them is the giving of the Law. Only Israel had a Law, given by God through Moses. Others are the worship, the priesthood, the covenants, the promises, the son ship (i.e., the special election of Israel by God) - all of these are unique to Israel. And finally, Messiah himself came through the Jews.

But in that list of distinctives Paul also lists another which is often overlooked. He says that to Israel is "the glory." He is not referring there to the fact that Israel has special honor, although that is true. It is specifically "*the* glory," something specific which Paul had in mind. The glory he is referring to is the Shekinah glory, the pillar of cloud by day, and of fire by night, which rested over the nation of Israel the symbol of God's presence among them, the visible representation of God's dwelling among his people. No other nation has had "*the* glory."

The term "Shekinah" is not a biblical term and does not occur anywhere in the Old Testament. It is a word the rabbis used after the Old Testament period to refer to "the glory." But it is based on a term which *does* occur in the Old Testament and which means "the dwelling" - God, dwelling with his people. That is the Shekinah glory.

For a thousand years Israel enjoyed the presence of God as illustrated by the Shekinah. The cloud appeared initially when Israel was in Egypt, as they were camped on the shore of the Red Sea, ready to leave Egypt and go out into the wilderness. This was the glory which protected them from the Egyptian army. And it was the glory which led them through the desert down to Mount Sinai. It was from the cloud as it appeared on Mount Sinai that the Law was revealed. After the tabernacle was erected, the glory appeared over it. And it filled the tabernacle - God dwelling between the cherubim on the mercy seat. It was the same cloud which led them from Sinai to Kadesh-barnea, and remained there while the nation wandered for thirty-eight years. Then, as they gathered again, it led them on into the Promised Land.

And evidently while the ark of God rested at Shiloh, the Shekinah dwelt there. In Psalm 99 David refers to the fact that Aaron and Moses and Samuel saw the glory of God revealed in the cloud. So the cloud must have remained over the ark all the time it was present at Shiloh. Later David brought the ark to Jerusalem. And when Solomon built the temple, again, the cloud filled the temple and was the visible representation of God, dwelling among his people. It must have been awesome in those days to approach the city of Jerusalem and see this great cloud resting on the temple by day, and a great pillar of fire by night. No other nation had the glory.

It was there throughout the period of Israel's apostasy and rejection of the truth, up to the time of the Babylonian captivity. Ezekiel seems to indicate that at that time, just prior to the Babylonian captivity, the cloud departed. He saw it remain for a moment over the walls of Jerusalem, and then vanish. And in the words of the Old Testament, the temple was "ichabod" - "the glory is not" - the glory had departed. Throughout the long period of the exile there was no glory. One of the exilic Psalms is basically a prayer that the glory might return to Israel. But it never has.

In the fourth chapter of Isaiah there is a prophetic reference to God's ultimate purpose for the cloud:

**When the Lord has washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion, and purged the bloodshed of Jerusalem from her midst, by the spirit of judgment and the spirit of burning, then the Lord will create over the whole area of Mount Zion and over her**

**assemblies a cloud by day, even smoke, and the brightness of a flaming fire by night; for over all the glory will be a canopy. And there will be a shelter to give shade from the heat by day, and refuge and protection from the storm and the rain.**

The cloud was many things to Israel. It was a source of protection, leadership, and guidance. It gave light at night and warmth in the chilly evenings. It provided shelter from the direct rays of the sun. It was a picture of all that God is to his people at any time.

There are many facets of the history of the cloud to which we could refer, but there is one which is particularly pertinent to our situation today. It is found in Numbers 9. The book of Numbers is an account of the wilderness wanderings of Israel. Our English title, Numbers, is derived from the two different censuses which were taken. The Hebrew title is "In the Wilderness," and that seems much more appropriate, because Numbers essentially is an account of the events which transpired within the nation of Israel while they wandered in the wilderness and made two approaches to the Promised Land - the first, to Kadesh-barnea, where they turned away in unbelief; the second, forty years later, when they went into the Land. The first nine chapters are a description of the preparations the nation of Israel made to enter the Land, and these are given in detail.

You have to put yourself in Moses' shoes to see the enormity of his responsibility. Israel numbered 1.5 to 2 million people at this time. We know from the first census that there were 603,550 fighting men, so there must have been close to 2 million people, if we consider women and children. Moses had to lead this mass of people approximately three hundred miles through a trackless wilderness. None of the people had been there before. He himself had been to Sinai, but he had never been through the portion of wilderness leading into the Promised Land. This would be somewhat comparable to God's asking you to lead the entire population of San Francisco and the Peninsula to Los Angeles by way of the Mojave Desert, when you had never been there before, and you had to take all of them - women, children, aged, infirm, dogs, cats, parakeets, grand pianos and all - through a region of the world you had never seen before. That was Moses' responsibility.

How could he carry out a responsibility like this? Well, God promised that he would provide leadership through the cloud. We stand today very much where Moses stood, as we begin a new year. We do not know what lies ahead. There are many uncertainties involved. There is a trackless wilderness ahead of us. We have never been there before. Most of us have 20/20 hindsight, but our foresight is very poor. We really do not know what to expect. But we, as Israel, have a cloud to lead us. I want us to look at Numbers 9, beginning at verse 15, in order to make some observations and then apply them to our situation today.

**Now on the day that the tabernacle was erected the cloud covered the tabernacle, the tent of the testimony, and in the evening it was like the appearance of fire over the tabernacle, until morning. So it was continuously; the cloud would cover it by day, and the appearance of fire by night. And whenever the cloud was lifted from over the tent, afterward the sons of Israel would then set out [the word means "break up," i.e., break camp]; and in the place where the cloud settled down [that is the Hebrew word "shakan" from which Shekinah comes; i.e., where it dwelt, rested, settled down], there the sons of Israel would camp. At the command of the Lord [in the margin, the American Standard Version has "mouth," i.e., God was speaking through the cloud] the sons of Israel would set out, and at the command of the Lord they would camp; as long as the cloud settled over the tabernacle, they remained camped. Even when the cloud lingered over the tabernacle for many days, the sons of Israel would keep the Lord's charge and not set out.**

The word here translated "lingered" means "dragged on"; i.e., when it was wearisome for them to remain. In fact, the Hebrew word for patience comes from this verb.

**If sometimes the cloud remained a few days over the tabernacle, according to the command of the Lord they remained camped. Then according to the command of the Lord they set out. If sometimes the cloud remained from evening until morning, when the cloud was lifted in the morning, they would move out; or if it remained in the daytime and at night, whenever the cloud was lifted they would set out.**

That is, if the cloud lifted in the evening they would break up camp and set out. If it lifted in the daytime they

would break up camp and set out.

**Whether it was two days or a month or a year that the cloud lingered over the tabernacle, staying above it, the sons of Israel remained camped and did not set out; but when it was lifted, they did set out. At the command of the Lord they camped, and at the command of the Lord they set out; they kept the Lord's charge, according to the command of the Lord through Moses.**

This repetition and elaboration of a theme is so characteristic of Jewish writings. You find it throughout Scripture. When these men want to underscore something they say it again and again, like driving a nail into a board and then turning to the other side and bending it over. There is no doubt about what Moses is saying here: they followed the cloud explicitly.

There are many observations we can make from this passage. I would like to ask you to spend a great deal of time on it in the next few weeks, doing your own study. But there are some things I would like to suggest in an initiatory way. First, it is very obvious that the cloud could provide no leadership unless the nation of Israel were willing to be led. You will note that the passage does not say that the cloud drove them; it led them. Likewise, we are not driven by the Spirit; we are led by the Spirit. The foundation for all leadership from God is a willingness on our part to go wherever the Lord wants us to go - wherever, and whenever, and however. God cannot provide leadership unless we are willing to give ourselves unreservedly to him with no secret reservations, no small print, but a yielded heart. That is basic. You can understand that if Moses, or one of the people, looked out of his tent in the morning and saw that the cloud had raised, and he realized that this was the day to move on, but then suddenly decided that this was a lovely place to stay and he did not want to move on, then the cloud could provide no leadership. I am sure, knowing what we know of God's gracious nature, that the cloud would not have moved on without the nation. But there would have been no progress. You see, basic to following the Lord is a willingness to go wherever he wants us to go.

A number of years ago when my children were younger, I took one of my sons to pick up the babysitter. As we walked up on the porch a big dog lunged at us. I didn't even see him coming. My son had on short pants, and as the dog lunged for his leg, my boy jumped all the way across the porch, straight into my arms, shinnied up my side, and held onto my head. The dog started gnawing on my leg, and I was helpless. I was sort of dancing around, trying to kick the dog. Finally the owner came out, grabbed the dog and dragged him off me. A few minutes later, as I was limping out to the car, my little boy said, "Daddy, I'll go anywhere with you!" His confidence was misplaced, I have no doubt. But so many times it has recurred to me that this is the attitude which enables us to receive the Lord's leadership. "Father, I'll go anywhere."

As I was driving to church this morning I stopped to get a cup of coffee, and on the table in the restaurant was a little sign:

"We're available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week." I thought, "That is exactly what we must say: 'Lord, I'm available. I'll go anywhere, I'll do anything. I'll even go to Texas if you want me to. I'll go to Hong Kong.' " Because the minute we say, "I'll go anywhere . . . but . . . " we frustrate God, we tie his hands. He cannot provide leadership as long as there is some attachment, some restriction we have placed on our own lives. That is paramount. Before we can ascertain the Lord's will for our lives, there must be a willingness to follow him wherever he leads us.

The second thing I see - and this is so encouraging to me - is that the cloud was conspicuous. Everyone could see it from miles away. I think it must have been much like the huge plume of steam and smoke which used to rise over the Permanente Cement plant a few years ago and which was visible from all over the Peninsula. So it was with this cloud in the wilderness. It was not some vaporous little wisp which could vanish in a puff of wind, or be confused with some passing cloud. It was a conspicuous, obvious phenomenon. It could not be missed. There was *no way* the nation of Israel could miss the will of God.

What this tells me is that God is not playing games with us. His will is not written on some flash card which he flashes at us, and if we blink, we miss it. He wants us to know his will. He wants us to know it more than we want to know it! And if we want to know his will, we cannot miss it. Do you believe that? The only people who miss God's will are those who do not want it.

That ought to set us free to live with abandonment. We can rise in the morning and say, "Lord, whatever . . . " and know through the day that God is going to lead us, and his leadership is going to be very clear and precise, and we cannot miss it. God is not going to lead us down some blind alley and say, "Aha! I caught you! You missed it after all." He is not that kind of Lord. His will is obvious and conspicuous.

The third thing I observe in this passage is that there is something very distinctive about following a cloud. People follow their investment counselors, or their psychiatrists, or their horoscopes, but the idea of following a cloud is not too appealing. As a matter of fact, people will scoff. Following the will of God is something that people outside of Christ cannot understand. It seems the most impractical way to live. They will ridicule you, they will misunderstand you, they will think you are terribly unrealistic. You see, there is something very unusual about following a cloud.

A couple of years ago a student friend of mine and I had lunch with a professor at Stanford. He was telling us about his spiritual background. He was not a Christian. He said that when he was in the Marines he had a Christian platoon sergeant who often shared the gospel with him, but he felt that he couldn't respond to it . . . "because it was so specific," he said. This sergeant had told him that after he got out of the Marine Corps he was going to the Midwest to live, because he was convinced that was where God wanted him. And the professor scoffed at the idea that God could provide this kind of leadership. But he does.

And if you follow the cloud you will be misunderstood, you will be scoffed at, people will not understand. Some of you, I know, have parents who do not understand choices you have made, because they have been choices based upon the will of God for your life. Expect it. Do not be surprised. It is a foolish thing, to the world, to follow a cloud.

The fourth principle, and I have already alluded to it, is that they followed the cloud explicitly. When the cloud lingered for a day, they dwelt there for a day. If it rose in the middle of the night, they rose in the middle of the night, packed their goods, and left. If it remained for a year, they remained for a year. If it lingered on in circumstances which were less than desirable, they remained. Now, that will be your experience this coming year. God will lead you into situations which are not necessarily of your choosing. Yours may not be the best possible circumstances. There may be hardship and pressure and distress, and God's will for you may be to linger there, because he is lingering there. And we must accept that. It is all part of the process that God is working out in our lives.

Perhaps you have had a very active ministry this past year, and this coming year God will seem to set you aside - you will have less ministry, less contact with people. But that is God's will for you. He may linger there for awhile, because there are some lessons that you and I need to learn in that spot, lessons which can be learned only there. And so we must linger there. Or perhaps you are a mother who has been actively engaged in some service or project, and now an infant has come into your home, and you are tied to that home, not free to go. You have to linger there, for that is God's will. You see, that is why Paul says, "In everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." That situation you find yourself in is the place where God wants you to remain. It may not be what you would choose, but it is what God has chosen for you.

Then I see a fifth thing here which is tied together with the fourth: God had a goal in mind when he led them by the cloud. The goal was the Promised Land, the land which God had promised to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. God was committed to leading the people from Sinai into the land of Canaan. That was the promise that was the goal. That is why sometimes the cloud lingered in spots which were less than desirable - because that was part of the process of getting from Sinai to Canaan. It was the only way to get there; there was no other route. That explains why God may take us through circumstances which are extremely difficult - because they are all part of the goal that God is working out in our lives, which is not to make us comfortable but to make us Christ like. It is God's desire that we manifest the character of Jesus Christ, that our lives manifest love, joy, peace, gentleness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness, and self-control. Those are attributes of Christ's life, and that is God's goal for your life and mine. Therefore, in order to accomplish that end, he may have to lead us through some experiences which are somewhat distressing, arduous, difficult, hazardous.

You see, he has a goal. He is not wandering. The people wandered, but if you read Numbers carefully you will discover that the cloud did not wander when the people wandered; the cloud remained at Kadesh. The people broke up into little bands and wandered throughout the wilderness. When the thirty-eight years were ended, they came back to Kadesh, and the cloud was still there, ready to take them right into the land. God does not wander, does not veer from the path. He has a goal in mind for your life and for mine, and he is going to take us there, though the process itself may be difficult. That is why Paul says, "All things work together for [the] good to those who love God, who are called according to his purpose." And *the* good, in that context, is conformity to Christ - glorification. That is why he can say that everything works to accomplish this goal. So wherever God takes you this year, through the trackless wasteland of 1974, and no matter what pressures you experience, *know* that the Lord has in mind a goal: he is leading you toward the promise which is the working out in your life of all God's desire for you - conformity to his Son.

So that is the way God led Israel through a cloud. And he is leading us today, but not through a cloud, because the visible representation of the glory, the cloud and the fire of that time, is reproduced in our lives in the person of Jesus Christ who indwells us. He is the glory, we are the sanctuary. He indwells us. The Shekinah is here. And he has promised to provide for us the same kind of leadership that he provided for his people during that thousand years. Proverbs 3:5, 6 says,

**Trust in the Lord with all your heart,  
And do not lean on your own understanding.  
In all your ways acknowledge Him,  
And He will make your paths straight.**  
[or, "He shall direct your paths."]

That is a promise. He will direct your path in 1974 if, first of all, you are willing to go wherever he leads you this year. That is where it begins. If you are willing, you cannot miss it. And second, recognize that perhaps 95 percent of his will is already revealed in the pages of the Bible. So give yourself this year to reading, studying, and giving heed to it, letting the Word address itself to the decisions and problems that you have to face this year, because almost all of God's will is revealed for us there. And in those areas where the word of God has not given us specific direction, know that the Spirit of God who indwells you will call the decisions. He will give you the deep-down sense of the rightness of an action that peace which passes understanding. That will be the basis for the decisions you will have to make - knowing that you cannot miss God's will. You can rise in the morning and say, "Lord, whatever, today," and begin to act out your life in whatever capacity the Lord places you, and know that God is going to lead you.

"Trust in the Lord with all your heart. Lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will direct your paths." We are like Israel, standing on the verge of the wilderness - this year of 1974. And in the words of that old chorus, "My Lord knows the way through the wilderness; all we have to do is follow."

*Thank you, Father, that you are the Wonderful Counselor. You are the One who directs us with your eye upon us. You are the One who knows where we are and what we are doing - what our situation is, what our problems are, and how we feel about things. You understand us, Father. And you have promised to give us wisdom from your word, and by the peace of your Spirit. Teach us, Lord, not to second-guess ourselves when we make decisions. Teach us to know that we have wisdom from above, and to act upon it with confidence, resting upon it no matter what may happen after the decision. Teach us, Father, to follow you wherever you lead us this year. Thank you that you know the way through the wilderness. You have been there before; therefore nothing is hidden from you. We thank you in Jesus' name, Amen.*

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