

Follow The Cloud, Not The Crowd Valley Center February 23, 2008

The Word of the Lord to you and me today is "Follow the Cloud, not the crowd." About 3,500 years ago, in the year 1445 B.C, God led His people Israel from Egypt by the hand of His servant Moses. This was in fulfillment of His promise made four centuries before to the patriarch Abraham, when He said, "Know certainly that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, and will serve them, and they will afflict them four hundred years. And also the nation whom they serve I will judge; afterward they shall come out with great possessions." Genesis 15:13, 14.

Exactly as God predicted, all this happened. By a mighty hand He brought deliverance to His people from the scourge of Pharaoh, who was reluctant to see his slave labor force leave. His accession to God's command was in stages. First the king said "Go, sacrifice *in the land.*" Then he said, "You can go, but *you can't take your children.*" Then it was, "You can go, but *you can't take your flocks.*"

Time after time Moses conveyed the Lord's directive that His people be released, each time the message being accompanied by a plague. Though Pharaoh was forced to recognize the divine nature of these miracles in the timing of their arrival as well as their removal, he consistently hardened his heart, until the last plague, when his first born son was slain. Then he and all the people of Egypt strongly encouraged the Israelites to leave.

When they left, how were they to find their way to Canaan? Was Moses to consult a Thomas Brothers' Map? Did he "Google" the destination on a laptop? No, they were not allowed to choose their own path. "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." Exodus 13:21, 22.

For the next four decades that Cloud would guide them. What was that cloud? It represented the *visible presence of Jehovah* in their midst. It was Jesus Christ, clothed in heavenly garments, Who was their Leader.

When the Egyptian host pursued the sons of Jacob and came upon them at the Red Sea, "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." Exodus 14:19.

When they expressed their lack of faith by complaining, "the glory of the LORD appeared in the cloud." Exodus 16:10.

At Mt. Sinai He said, "Behold, I come to you in the thick cloud, that the people may hear when I speak with you." Exodus 19:9.

It was from the midst of this thick cloud that the voice of God thundered His law. Exodus 19:16.

It was into this cloud that Moses ascended and spent time with the Lord and received the Law from His hand. Exodus 24:15.

It was from within the cloud that He "proclaimed the name of the LORD." Exodus 34:5.

It was the cloud which covered the tabernacle upon its completion and from which shone the glory of the Lord. Exodus 40:34.

It was the cloud that signaled the time of breaking camp and moving on. "When the cloud was taken up, from above the tabernacle, the children of Israel went onward in all their journeys. But if the cloud was not taken up, then they did not journey till the day that it was taken up. For 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, throughout all their journeys." Exodus 40:36-38.

For forty years Israel "followed the Cloud." How wonderful that the gracious Lord provided this constant visual reminder of His presence and protection. It wasn't just there to remind them that He was with them; there was also a very practical benefit afforded by its canopy. The cloud by day was a cooling shade through the desert wastes. "He spread a cloud for a covering," writes David. Psalm 105:39. If you've ever labored under a hot desert sun, and then welcomed the respite of a passing cloud, you know what this meant to the Israelites traveling in the wilderness. In the darkness, it was an ever-present "night light" to give them the comfort of His attendance. At any time, a child could peek from within the folds of his family tent and be reassured that the "Light" was still with them.

Then, on occasion, the mighty Cloud would magnificently be lifted up, and the congregation knew it was time to pull the stakes of their dwellings and begin their pilgrimage once more. Throughout the book of Numbers we read statements like, "Now it came to pass on the twentieth day of the second month, in the second year, that the cloud was taken up from above the tabernacle of the Testimony. And the children of Israel set out from the Wilderness of Sinai on their journeys; then the cloud settled down in the Wilderness of Paran." Numbers 10:11, 12.

Whenever they began a new journey, Moses proclaimed, "Rise up, O LORD! Let Your enemies be scattered, and let those who hate You flee before You." And when the cloud would come to its rest, he would say, "Return, O LORD, to the many thousands of Israel." Numbers 10:35, 36.

Sometimes the cloud led them in a direction that didn't seem right, according to conventional wisdom. If you lived back then, you might have known that a wonderful highway led from Egypt to Canaan, through the land of the Philistines. The most direct

route, it was only about 250 miles in length. They could have been in Canaan in 30 days!

If you look at the map below, you'll see that where they went was not the direct route to Canaan! (This map does not depict the wilderness wanderings.)



For comparison, try to imagine that you were part of a group slated to go from San Diego to Bakersfield, a trip of about 250 miles. Now, there's a wonderful freeway, Interstate 5, four lanes or more in some places that would allow you to zip up there in four hours or less. But instead of leaving San Diego due north, you're somewhat surprised that you find your car, as a part of this long caravan, on route 79. You're going through Ramona, Julian and Borrego Springs. Now you're on CA highway 111 as you pass through Box Canyon and head toward Prescott, Arizona. Now you're on AZ-71 and going through Joshua Tree. Heading north, you pass through Las Vegas and then Death Valley, and finally on CA-58 the journey begins to turn west toward Bakersfield. Human reasoning would declare this itinerary foolish and a waste of time. Why not go the direct route? Why didn't God lead Israel directly from Egypt to Canaan?

The Lord foresaw that this was not the best plan. For one thing, they would have encountered those fierce, warlike people, the Philistines. More importantly, they needed to learn lessons of trust, faith and a deeper understanding of the holiness of His law before they could occupy Canaan. They would spend nearly a year at the foot of Sinai as Old Testament disciples listening to the "sermon on the mount."

Here is how Matthew Henry's Commentary explains it. "There were two ways from Egypt to Canaan. One was only a few days' journey; the other was much further (round) about, through the wilderness, and that was the way in which God chose to lead his people Israel. The Egyptians were to be drowned in the Red sea; the Israelites were to be humbled and proved in the wilderness. God's way is the right way, though it seems (round) about. If we think he leads not his people the nearest way, yet we may be sure he leads them the best way, and so it will appear when we come to our journey's end. The Philistines were powerful enemies; it was needful that the Israelites should be prepared for the wars of Canaan, by passing through the difficulties of the wilderness."

And so, contrary to the shortest route available, the cloud turned south and east after they crossed the Red Sea, rather than north. How the faces of Israel must have darkened when they discerned this change of direction. Murmuring bubbled. Discontent simmered. "I thought we were going to Canaan, not Arabia. Is anyone in charge? Doesn't Moses know where we should be heading?" This, despite the visible, miraculous presence of the Almighty right before their eyes! The very integrity of Moses was questioned.

After they left Mt. Sinai, when the cloud led them to the borders of Canaan, at Kadesh Barnea, the people concocted a plan to search out the land, when God had already done so (See Ezekiel 20:6; Deuteronomy 1:22). The cloud was ready to lead them forward into a grand entrance, but faith faltered on the

borders, and resulted in another 38 years of wandering till that generation expired. Still, patiently God, through the ministry of the Cloud, loved, guided, covered and protected them.

“Follow the Cloud, not the crowd.” That’s the Word of the Lord to you and to me today. The Bible makes a striking application of the pilgrimage of Israel to our Christian experience. Paul writes, “Moreover brethren, I do not want you to be unaware that all our fathers were under the cloud, all passed through the sea, all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, on whom the ends of the ages of come.” I Corinthians 10:1, 11.

Notice that Paul said that they were “baptized” in the sea and in the cloud. It’s easy to see how baptism was illustrated by going through the Red Sea, because (even though they passed through on dry land) it symbolized the washing that baptism depicts. If you want to, you can even see the “Red” Sea as a token of Jesus’ blood. But what about being “baptized by the cloud”? What’s the message in that phrase?

What is baptism, anyway? Baptism is a public, formal statement of dedication to the Lord and His ways. Baptism is when you declare not merely that you want Him to *wash away your sins*, but also your intention to *follow Him* in your life. That’s precisely what the cloud represented to Israel! Paul is saying that they were “washed” in the Red Sea, and in a very literal way, they “followed the Lord” when they were guided by the cloud. We need both, don’t we. We need the baptism of the “sea” *and* of the “cloud.” We need not only to have our sins forgiven, but to follow Him and grow in our Christian walk.

Like what happened to Israel of old, sometimes the guidance of the Lord today leads us in a direction that doesn’t seem to make sense to us. That’s because His goal is our salvation. God sees the “big picture.” His intention is to make us ready for the

kingdom. His purpose is to reshape our characters into the likeness of Jesus.

We may groan as did His children back then when it seems our path is thorny or rocky. But God's wisdom is best. He knows just what we need in our experience to take sin out of our lives. He knows what we need to develop trust and faith. He knows what we need to mature into Christ-like people. And so, often He leads us in a way that at first we don't appreciate. We don't value the narrow, twisting road that brings hardship. We don't see the necessity of traveling the rocky path. But in all these experiences, He is training us for heaven. Later, as we look back, we'll confess that He's done all things well.

Part of the problem is that we don't always share God's purpose for our lives. We focus on the temporary while God sees the eternal. We gravitate toward the earthly, while God envisions the heavenly. We cling to the "now," while He contemplates the "forever." And so, we desire bigger houses and newer cars, while God sees that what we really need is patience and trust. We chase after larger bank accounts while God sees we desperately need the riches of His grace. We long for forbidden pleasures, while God invites us to enjoy the serenity of His peace. We busy ourselves in this world's activities, so that we can relax in a life of ease, while God beckons us to pause and enjoy the perpetual worth of His ways. We want the wide and broad road, while He leads us along the narrow path.

The world disdains following the Cloud of Christ. It's a compass the world has no place for. "Numbers" have never been a reliable measurement of God's way. The majority is seldom right when comes to divine truth. The best wisdom for us today is "Follow the Cloud, not the crowd."

If you followed the crowd in Noah's day, you would have believed conventional scientific wisdom (all the "smart people" back then said water could not come from the sky), but you would have perished in the flood.

If you followed the crowd in Lot's day, you would have enjoyed a night of feasting and revelry, and you would have mocked an old man's invitation, but you would have perished the next morning.

If you followed the crowd on the plain of Dura, in Babylon, you would have bowed to an idol and missed a glorious deliverance.

If you followed the crowd that Friday at Calvary, you would have put Jesus on the cross.

On the other hand, *if you follow the Cloud today, you'll be in a small minority. The religion of Jesus is simple: Love and obey Him. Fear God and keep His commandments. What's difficult about that? And yet, if you do, you will find yourself in a relatively small group. Keeping His commandments, including the one that identifies His day of worship, will separate you from the vast majority of those who call themselves Christians.*

It's always best to follow the Cloud. But following the cloud will keep you moving; it will bring change. You won't stay in the same place very long. Really, there's no such thing as a motionless, static religious experience. It's rather like the effect of inflation on money. If the number stays the same, you're really going backward. Someone described religious experience as taking a ride not in a helicopter, but an airplane. "If you stop, you drop!"

If you follow the Cloud, you won't be the same person next year as you are today. Jesus will have brought you to a new place in your experience. He will bring you to new understandings of His truth.

If you follow the cloud, you may see Bible truth in a light you had not seen before. In some cases, major changes in what you believe may become a part of your new life if you follow the Cloud.

He will bring you to new choices in your lifestyle. If you follow the Cloud, there will be some things that are in your life today that won't be there later. You won't have interest in them anymore. What you feed your mind will be different

when you follow the Cloud and not the crowd. You'll be more interested in spending your time and finances for the advancement of His kingdom, than seeing how your accommodations can be improved.

He will bring you to a new dimension in your relationships with others. Harsh, unnecessary criticism will be softened and removed. Gossiping and story peddling will be set aside. You will think, act, behave and relate to others in a way more consistently like Jesus would if He were here today. Isn't that what you want? That will be your experience if you "follow the Cloud, not the crowd."



Thirty-six year old Marine Major Brian Dennis is serving his second tour of duty in Iraq. A pack of semi-wild dogs lived near one of the forts that Dennis patrolled, the leader of which was a wiry German shepherd-border collie mix. Dennis named him "Nubs," because his ears had been chopped off as a puppy. At

first, Nubs didn't respond to Dennis' friendly gestures, but the marine wasn't about to give up. After several months passed, Nubs began to warm up. Then during one visit to the fort, Dennis discovered that Nubs had a deep puncture wound in his side. He learned later that Nubs had been attacked by a screwdriver. Dennis helped nurse Nubs back to health.

Then Dennis' unit had to relocate to a position some 70 miles away. He might have wanted to take Nubs with him, but it was against the rules. When the Humvees pulled away, Dennis watched, presumably for the last time, as Nubs trotted along side.

But two days later, in below freezing conditions, Nubs wandered into Dennis' new camp. The Major said something like, "I won't even address the gauntlet he had to run of dog packs and wolves and who knows what else to get here. When he arrived, he looked like he'd just been through a war zone. Uh, wait a minute, he had."

Dennis and his compatriots decided to keep the dog and built a dog house at the camp. When military officers informed him the dog had to go, Dennis took it literally: Nubs was put on a plane and arrived safely in the United States. He now awaits his master's return from combat. When I heard that story this week, I thought, "What an amazing parallel!" Jesus has befriended us. He has healed us. If we follow Him, though it be through wilderness or desert, He will make arrangements to "fly us home."

You might be asking, "How do we follow Cloud today?" After all, we don't have the visible cloud that Israel witnessed in the wilderness. How can we have the experience of following the Cloud in our lives in 2008? The truth is that we **can** have the same experience as they had, even without the visible token of His presence. The question is not so much "How do you gain heaven's wisdom?" The real question is "Do you want heaven's wisdom?" God is waiting to reveal Himself to us if we are open to

hear. He is just as willing to provide the guidance of His Cloud in our lives today as He was back then.

It begins with surrender to His will and a crying out for His direction. Paul had a "Cloud" experience on the Damascus road when He encountered the risen Lord. When he inquired, "What do you want me to do?" the Lord's wisdom was quickly imparted to him. Do you want to follow Him? Ask, plead, beg for Him to reveal Himself to you, and He will.

If you want the "Cloud" experience, put yourself in touch with His Word each day. He will speak to you and lead you. This Book is the primary supply of His truth. It is Heaven's Sourcebook for divine guidance. By reading it, you put yourself in contact with the Sovereign of the universe.

"Read the Bible every day
As you do, take time to pray
He will lead you, He will guide,
He will make you new inside."

When you pray, ask for the Holy Spirit's direction in your life. Ask for His wisdom, not just in the decisions that are the "fork in the road" moments, but for strength and power to live like Jesus, to be able to discern and resist the temptations of the devil.

When you follow the Cloud, you will see, as time goes by, that He has been leading in your life. Someone said, "Coincidence is when God chooses to remain anonymous." "That job" did not come by mere accident. "That friendship" was not formed in a vacuum. "That impression" was not just a thought that grew on its own. The Voice of God has been speaking to you. He has been guiding you. He has been there, like a mighty Cloud to lead and direct all the affairs of your life.

Following the Cloud may not be a path of ease, but it's the safest path. "God promises a safe landing, not a calm passage." My Bible tells me that the Christian life involves "wrestling" and

“fighting the fight of faith.” The human heart strives for supremacy. It clamors for attention. It wants its own way. The way of the world, the way of the crowd, is to give in to what the Bible calls the “carnal” nature. Someone said “treat yourself, don’t cheat yourself.” Living for ones own desires and wants is the way of the crowd.

Christ presents before us another way. It’s the “road less taken.” It’s a narrow road that involves self-denial and sacrifice. It’s the road our Savior trod. It’s the way the Cloud leads you today. It may not be a very popular path, this path of humility, but it’s the path that will bring you peace and joy. If you submit to the “Cloud” experience, I can tell you one thing for sure. Before too long another “cloud” is going to impact your life. The “cloud” that has been the invisible presence of Jesus will become the brightest, most glorious spectacle the world has ever witnessed. The cloud of His coming, when the sky opens and Jesus returns, will bring the moment of greatest happiness for the one who has followed the Cloud, and not the crowd.