

The Cloudy Pillar.

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Article 12 of 47 **Short Meditations**

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We are all of us in wealthier places than we are aware of, and have far richer interest in Christ than we are disposed to allow. Many quickened souls scarcely dare to stand in the justification of their persons; and yet they read of "justification of life." (Rom. 5: 18) "The glory of God" in their own history as sinners who have received Jesus, has still to be learnt in some of its further brightness.

This suggests to my remembrance the Cloudy Pillar that accompanied the camp of Israel — and I am too much attracted by this object, not to turn aside and look at it for a little space.

Israel in Egypt had wondrous witness of what God was to them. Plague upon plague, in which they had been preserved, had swept through that land; and in the night of the Destroying Angel, the blood on the lintel had sheltered them. The Cloudy Pillar had also begun to lead them on the way out of the land. Still, after all this, when they came to stand between the host of Egypt and the Red Sea, all this was as a thing forgotten. They feared and murmured.

How dull we are to learn, how slow of heart to believe, the secrets of grace and the faithfulness of God! Whether Israel stand at the edge of the wilderness in the presence of the Cloudy Pillar, or, as I may say, whether disciples stand at the grave of Lazarus in the presence of Jesus, (Ex. 14, John 11) we see this.

But again and again He proves that it is not in Him we are straitened.

That mystic Pillar, as I may call it, accompanied the Camp all along the road from the very heart of the land of Egypt to the very borders of the land of Canaan. That is, as soon as it was wanted till it was wanted no more.

It lets us know likewise, that it had many and various virtues in it, and all of them suited to the rising and changeful exigencies of the people. It did not travel along that road but for the sake of Israel. It was there, because Israel was there. It was therefore what Israel needed it to be. It was the condition of the camp, be that what it may, that drew out its secret glories and virtues. This was its character. Thus we read its history.

As soon as Israel have been redeemed by the blood on the lintel, and have started on their journey, this Pillar meets them, and sets itself before them to be their Guide. They are about to enter on a trackless waste. No man dwelt where Israel was soon to travel. There were no land-marks, no signposts there. Its barrenness would demand bread from heaven, its drought water from the Rock, but its pathlessness would as surely need a Leader — and He who was to open angels' stores for them, and rivers in rocks, would raise for them a Pillar to be cloud by day and fire by night, that they might still be on their way, whether by night or day. And thus they would be independent of highways and signposts in the *trackless* desert, as they would be of cornfields and vineyards in the *barren* desert.

But the Pillar was much beside this, to Israel. It was not merely cloud and fire alternately, as day and night succeeded each other, it was also light and darkness at the very same moment, when Israel needed such a thing.

The host of Egypt had come out, and were pressing on the heels of the children of Israel; and

then, the Pillar puts itself between the two hosts; and instead of being lighted and luminous throughout, it becomes darkness on the side turned to the Egyptians, and light on the side turned to the Israelites, so that the one could not come nigh the other. It was a shield now, as it had been a conductor before. It is just whatever the people wanted. This is the due account to give of it. This was its way. It expressed the grace of Him that had now saved Israel. It is alternate cloud and fire, if the camp need that; light and darkness at the very self-same moment, if they need that.

And much more still. There is One who has made that Cloud His dwelling-place, whose look will prove the overthrow of all those who plot mischief against the camp. The flower of Egypt withers under it; Pharoah's horses and chariots are drowned in the Red Sea before it. "The Lord looked unto the host of the Egyptians through the pillar of fire and of the cloud, and troubled the host of the Egyptians, and took off their chariot-wheels, that they drave them heavily."

What glories fill that wondrous place — what energies as well as virtues for Israel's use! And how do these disclose themselves as Israel needs them!

And further. It can express rebuke and resentment when this becomes healthful discipline for Israel. In the days of their murmurings again and again, the glory in the cloud lets them know that its rest had been disturbed. It appears to them in the day of the manna, and of the spies, and of the rebellion of Korah; and they see it in the consciousness of Divine and righteous anger. It is like the resentment of the grieved Spirit which the saint of God is now conscious of. And all this shows that the Cloud was not simply the companion, but the *interested* companion of the camp. It felt with as well as *for* their condition.

But again we find that if it thus rebuked and resented when discipline was called for, it was ready with all readiness to welcome and answer the approaches of faith. When the Tabernacle was reared up by the willing and obedient people, and in them faith had accepted the communications which the Lord had made to them by Moses touching the order and furniture and services of His house, how did the Glory at once and with evident delight fill that house, and the Cloud rest upon it! (Ex. 40) With what wholeness of heart and soul did the Lord own the place where faith had met the rich provisions of His grace!

Oh, what various glory and virtue are thus seen in this mystic companion of the camp of Israel. It has light for its guidance, terror for its enemies, a shield as impenetrable as the thick darkness itself for its security — it has rebukes for its waywardness, and the richest, readiest encouragements and consolations for its faith — and further still it is unwearied even to the end, and will wait on Israel till they need it no more.

This we see in Deut. 31. There the patient, gracious, faithful Pillar, as I may call it, is seen again, just as the journey of the wilderness is closing.

The camp had brought upon itself a pilgrimage of forty years, when they might have had but a journey of a few months. They are sent back from Kadesh-barnea to the Red Sea, because of their sin and provocation, but the Pillar will surely go back with them. It will compass one wasted mountain after another, and take the road from one wilderness to another, if Israel have subjected themselves to these desert-wanderings. And it is unwearied. We see it at the end, as we have said, in Deut. 31, as we saw it at the beginning in Exodus 13.

And now, the application of all this easily suggests itself.

As we read in the blessed story of the Evangelists, the disciples saw the doings of the Lord day by day; and yet, in spite of all that, they were at their wits' end again and again, when fresh difficulties

arose. The hunger of the multitude on the shore was too much for them; the winds and the waves on the lake were too much for them. The Lord had to disclose again and again, like the Pillar of the desert, the secret virtues which were in Him for their rebuke and illumination. His glories in grace and in power, His sovereignty over the forces of nature, and His resources in the face of the barrenness of nature, all were brought forth according to the demand of the moment.

And, like the Pillar, he was unwearied. He went with the disciples from the beginning to the end. And it was surely patient, suffering, unweariedness. He took them up as ignorant fishermen on the shores of the sea of Galilee, and He never leaves them, though at the end he found them pretty much the same ignorant fishermen still. "Have I been so long time with you, and yet hast thou not known me, Philip," He had to say, just at the closing of His sojourn with them. But then, a fresh disclosure of Himself is made in answer to this; another ray of His glory is let out, and He adds, "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father."

And so is it again, after this same manner, on the eminent occasion of John 11. The Lord lets the sickness of Lazarus end in death. He stays where He was till He could say, "Lazarus sleepeth" — for then He could bring forth Himself in this form of Divine glory, "I go that I may awake him out of sleep." It was at the grave, and not merely at the sick bed, that He was to be displayed or glorified. It was in the place of the full fruit, and apparent, temporary triumph of sin, that "the glory of God" was to be seen. No less spot could give occasion to the manifestation of that glory in its brightest form. And there, too, disciples were to learn the exhaustless stores which He carried in Himself for the meeting of all their need, and the consummation of all their blessing.

Much of the Divine glory, in the person and works of Christ, had been already revealed to the family of Bethany, and to the disciples who are now gathered at the grave of Lazarus. Andrew and Philip had, long before this, left the presence of the Lamb of God, satisfied and happy. (John 1) Peter had owned Him as the One that had the words of eternal life. (John 6) John and James, as well as Peter, had seen the Transfiguration. (Matt. 17) The dear household at Bethany had welcomed and entertained Him, served Him with their best, and heard His words as with ravished hearts. (Luke 10) These are among the many witnesses that had already given in their several testimonies to what He was and who He was, in the presence of that people who were now 'around the grave of Lazarus. And yet, they were, one and all of them, betraying their ignorance of the full glory that belonged to Him, and of the Divine energies that had their springs in Him, and were ready to exercise themselves at His good-pleasure. None of them as yet knew that He could say of Himself, "I am the resurrection and the life." They were all talking of death. There was virtue in "the last day," they could acknowledge (verse 24); but none of them were in the secret of "the first resurrection." They had known Him as the Christ, and gone to Him as sinners, seeing His glory (as I may take leave to express it) at the grave of their souls, but they had not as yet counted on seeing it at the grave of their *bodies* whenever it was His good-pleasure to have it so.

There was a further treasure in Him, and in Him for them, that hitherto they had not apprehended. The Cloudy Pillar where the Glory dwelt had virtues in it for the use of Israel, which this New Testament Israel, like their brethren of old, had not reckoned on. For we are all in wealthier places than we are aware of. And the patient, gracious Master still goes on with us even to the banks of the Jordan. Peter had found out his death-stricken condition, without the Son of the living God, and he had said to Him therefore, "To whom shall we go; thou hast the words of eternal life" — but Peter has still to learn that the sepulchre in the garden is empty, (John 20) and that the sepulchre at Bethany shall be so. For he shall be in the company of his Divine Master even to the end, though as yet he knows so imperfectly the glories and virtues that lie hid in that Pillar of this desert, ruined world.