

The Guiding Pillar

by Alexander Maclaren

The sermon emphasizes the importance of following God's guidance, which is available through His word, His Spirit, and circumstances, and ultimately through His Son, Jesus Christ.

Scripture: Exodus 13:21

Topics: "Obedience to God", "Divine Guidance"

Description

Alexander Maclaren emphasizes the significance of the guiding pillar in the Israelites' journey through the wilderness, illustrating how it symbolizes God's presence and guidance. He explains that while the Israelites relied on a visible pillar of cloud and fire, Christians today have a more profound guide in Jesus Christ, who embodies the light and direction we need. Maclaren highlights the importance of being attentive and obedient to God's guidance, as the Israelites were, and encourages believers to trust in God's timing and direction in their lives. He reminds us that both the stability of the cloud and the brightness of the fire represent God's unwavering presence, adapting to our needs. Ultimately, he calls for a heart that is watchful and ready to follow God's lead, ensuring we remain aligned with His will.

Transcript

THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL in the wilderness, surrounded by miracle, had nothing which we do not possess. They had some things in an inferior form; their sustenance came by manna; ours comes by God's blessing on our daily work, which is better. Their guidance came by this supernatural pillar; ours comes by the reality of which that pillar was nothing but a picture. And so, instead of fancying that men thus led were in advance of us, we should learn that these, the supernatural manifestations, visible and palpable, of God's presence and guidance were the beggarly elements: "God having provided some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect." With this explanation of the relation between the miracle and symbol of the old, and the reality and standing miracle of the new covenants, let us look at the eternal truths, which are set before us in a transitory form, in this cloud by day and fiery pillar by night.

Note, first, the double form of the guiding pillar.

The fire was the center; the cloud was wrapped around it. The former was the symbol, making visible to a generation who had to be taught through their senses the inaccessible holiness, and flashing brightness, and purity of the Divine nature; the latter tempered and veiled the too great brightness for feeble eyes.

The same double element is found in all God's manifestations of Himself to men. In every form of revelation are present both the heart and core of light, which no eye can look upon, and the merciful veil which, because it veils, unveils; because it hides, reveals; makes visible because it conceals; and shows God because it is the hiding of His power. So, through all the history of His dealings with men, there has ever been what is called in Scripture language the "face," or the "name of God"; the aspect of the Divine nature on which eye can look; and manifested through it there has always been the depth and inaccessible abyss of that infinite Being. We have to be thankful that in the cloud is the fire, and that round the fire is the cloud. For only so can our eyes behold and our hands grasp the else invisible and remote central Sun of the universe. God hides to make better known the glories of His character. His revelation is the flashing of the uncreated and intolerable light of His infinite Being through the encircling clouds of human conceptions and words, or of deeds which each show forth, in forms fitted to our apprehension, some fragment of His luster. After all revelation, He remains unrevealed. After ages of showing forth His glory He is still the King invisible, whom no man hath seen at any time nor can see. The revelation which He makes of Himself is "truth, and is no lie. "The recognition of the presence in it of both the fire and the cloud does not cast any doubt on the reality of our imperfect knowledge, or the authentic participation in the nature of the central light, of the sparkles of it which reach us. We know with a real knowledge what we know of Him. What He shows us is Himself, though not His whole self.

This double aspect of all possible revelation of God, which was symbolized in comparatively gross external form in the pillar that led Israel on its march, and lay stretched out and quiescent, a guarding covering above the tabernacle when the weary march was still, recurs all through the history of Old Testament revelation by type, and prophecy, and ceremony, in which the encompassing cloud was comparatively dense, and the light which pierced it relatively faint. It reappears in both elements, but combined in new proportions, so as that "the veil -that is to say, His flesh" is thinned to transparency and all aglow with the indwelling luster of manifest Deity. So a light, set in some fair alabaster vase, shines through its translucent walls, bringing out every delicate tint and meandering vein of color, while itself diffused and softened by the enwrapping medium which it beautifies by passing through its pure walls. Both are made visible and attractive to dull eyes by the conjunction. He that hath seen Christ hath seen the Father, and he that hath seen the Father in Christ hath seen the man Christ as none see Him who are blind to the incarnate Deity which illuminates the manhood in which it dwells.

But we have to note also the varying appearance of the pillar according to need. There was a double change in the pillar according to the hour, and according as the congregation was on the march or encamped. By day it was a cloud; by night it glowed in the darkness. On the march it moved before them, an upright pillar, as gathered together for energetic movement; when the camp rested it "returned to the many thousands of Israel" and lay quietly stretched above the tabernacle like one of the long-drawn motionless clouds above the setting summer's sun, glowing through all its substance with unflashing radiance reflected from unseen light, and "on all the glory" (shrined in the Holy Place beneath) was "a defense."

But these changes of aspect symbolize for us the reality of the Protean capacity of change according to our ever-varying needs, which for our blessing we may find in that ever-changing, unchanging Divine presence which will be our companion, if we will.

It was not only by a natural process that, as daylight declined, what had seemed but a column of smoke, in the fervid desert sunlight, brightened into a column of fire, blazing amid the clear stars. But we may well believe in an actual admeasurement of the degree of light correspondent to the darkness and to the need

for certitude and cheering sense of God's protection which the defenseless camp would feel as they lay down to rest.

When the deceitful brightness of earth glistens and dazzles around me, my vision of Him may be "a cloudy screen to temper the deceitful ray"; and when "there stoops on our path, in storm and shade, the frequent night," as earth grows darker, and life becomes grayer and more somber, and verges to its even, the pillar blazes brighter before the weeping eye, and draws near to the lonely heart. We have a God that manifests Himself in the pillar of cloud by day, and in the flaming fire by night.

Note the guidance of the pillar.

When it lifts the camp marches; when it glides down and lies motionless the march is stopped and the tents are pitched. The main thing which is dwelt upon in this description of the God-guided pilgrimage of the wandering people is the absolute uncertainty in which they were kept as to the duration of their encampment, and as to the time and circumstances of their march. Sometimes the cloud tarried upon the tabernacle many days; sometimes for a night only; sometimes it lifted in the night. "Whether it was by day or by night that the cloud was taken up, they journeyed. Or whether it were two days, or a month, or a year, that the cloud tarried upon the tabernacle, remaining thereon, the children of Israel abode in their tents, and journeyed not: but when it was taken up, they journeyed." So never, from moment to moment, did they know when the moving cloud might settle, or the resting cloud might soar. Therefore, absolute uncertainty as to the next stage was visibly represented before them by that hovering guide which determined everything, and concerning whose next movement they knew absolutely nothing.

Is not that all true about us? We have no guiding cloud like this. So much the better. Have we not a more real guide? God guides us by circumstances; God guides us by His word; God guides us by His Spirit, speaking through our common sense and in our understanding; and, most of all, God guides us by that dear Son of His, in whom is the fire and round whom is the cloud. And perhaps we may even suppose that our Lord implies some allusion to this very symbol in His own great words, "I am the light of the world; he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the sight of life." For the conception of "following" the light seems to make it plain that our Lord's image is not that of the sun in the heavens, or any such supernal light, but of some light that comes near enough to a man to move before him, and behind which he can march.

So, I think that Christ Himself laid His hand upon this ancient symbol, and in these great words said in effect, "I am that which it only shadowed and foretold." At all events, whether in them He was pointing to our text or no, we must feel that He is the reality which was expressed by this outward symbol. And no man who can say, "Jesus Christ is the Captain of my salvation, and after His pattern I march; at the pointing of His guiding finger I move; and in His footsteps, He being my helper, I want to tread," need feel or fancy that any possible pillar, floating before the dullest eye, was a better, surer, and Diviner guide than he possesses. They whom Christ guides want none other for leader, pattern, counselor, companion, reward. This Christ is our Christ forever and ever; He will be our guide, even unto death, and beyond it. The pillar that we follow, which will glow with the ruddy flame of love in the darkest hours of life - blessed be His name -- will glide in front of us through the valley of the shadow of death, brightest then when the murky midnight is blackest. Nor will the pillar which guides us cease to blaze as did the guide of the desert march, when Jordon has been crossed. It will still move before us on paths of continuous and ever-increasing approach to infinite perfection. They who follow Christ afar off and with faltering steps here shall there "follow the Lamb whithersoever he goeth."

In like manner, the same absolute uncertainty which was intended to keep the Israelites (though it failed often) in the attitude of constant dependence, is the condition in which we all have to live, though we mask it from ourselves. That we do not know what lies before us is a commonplace. The same long tracks of monotonous continuance in the same place and doing the same duties, befall us that befell these men. Years pass, and the pillar spreads itself out, a defense above the unmoving sanctuary. And then, all of a flash, when we are least thinking of change, it gathers itself together, is a pillar again, shoots upwards, and moves forwards; and it is for us to go after it. And so our lives are shuttle-cocked between uniform sameness which may become mechanical monotony, and agitation by change which may make us lose our hold of fixed principles and calm faith, unless we recognize that the continuance and the change are alike the will of the guiding God whose will is signified by the stationary or moving pillar.

That leads me to the last thing that I would note -viz., the docile following of the Guide.

In the context the writer does not seem to be able to get away from the thought that whatever the pillar did, that moment prompt obedience follows. He says it over and over and over again. "As long as the cloud abode ... they rested.... And when the cloud tarried long ... [they] journeyed not"; and "when the cloud was a few days on the tabernacle ... they abode"; and "according to the commandment they journeyed"; and "when the cloud abode until the morning ... they journeyed"; and "whether it were two days, or a month, or a year, that the cloud tarried ... [they] journeyed not, but abode in their tents." So, after he has reiterated the thing half a dozen times or more, he finishes by putting it all again in one verse, as the last impression which he would leave from the whole narrative -"at the commandment of the Lord they rested in their tents, and at the commandment of the Lord they journeyed." Obedience was prompt; whensoever and for whatsoever the signal was given the men were ready. In the night, after they had had their tents pitched for a long period, somewhere or other, in the night, when only the watchers' eyes were open, the pillar lifts, and in an instant the alarm is given, and all the camp is in a bustle. That is what we have to set before us as the type of our lives--that we shall be as ready for every indication of God's will as they were. The peace and blessedness of our lives largely depend on our being eager to obey, and therefore quick to perceive the slightest sign of motion in the resting or of rest in the moving pillar which regulates our march and our encamping.

What do we want in order to cultivate and keep such a disposition? We need perpetual watchfulness lest the pillar should lift unnoticed. When Nelson was second in command at Copenhagen, the admiral in command of the fleet hoisted the signal for recall, and Nelson put his telescope to his blind eye and said, "I do not see it." That is very like what we are tempted to do; the signal for unpleasant duties that we want to get out of is hoisted; we are very apt to put the telescope to the blind eye and pretend to ourselves that we do not see the fluttering flags.

We need still more to keep our wills in absolute suspense, if His will has not declared itself. Do not let us be in a hurry to run before God. When the Israelites were crossing the Jordan they were told to leave a great space between themselves and the guiding ark, that they might know how to go, because "they had not passed that way heretofore." Impatient hurrying at God's heels is apt to lead us astray. Let Him get well in front, that you may be quite sure which way He wants you to go, before you go. And if you are not sure which way He wants you to go, be sure that He does not at that moment want you to go anywhere.

We need to hold the present with a slack hand, so as to be ready to fold our tents and take to the road if God will. We must not reckon on continuance, nor strike our roots so deep that it needs a hurricane to remove us. To those who set their gaze on Christ, no present from which He wishes them to remove can

be so good for them as the new conditions into which He would have them pass. It is hard to leave the spot, though it be in the desert, where we have so long encamped that it has come to look like home. We may look with regret on the circle of black ashes on the sand where our little fire glinted cheerily, and our feet may ache and our hearts ache more as we begin our tramp once again, but we must set ourselves to meet the God-appointed change cheerfully, in the confidence that nothing will be left behind which it is not good to lose, nor anything met which does not bring a blessing, however its first aspect may be--harsh or sad.

We need, too, to cultivate the habit of prompt obedience. "I made haste and delayed not to keep Thy commandments" is the only safe motto. It is reluctance which usually puts the drag on. Slow obedience is often the germ of incipient disobedience. In matters of prudence and of intellect second thoughts are better than first, and third thoughts, which often come back to first ones, better than second; but, in matters of duty, first thoughts are generally best. They are the instructive response of conscience to the voice of God, while second thoughts are too often the objections of disinclination, or sloth, or cowardice. It is easiest to do our duty when we are first sure of it. It then comes with an impelling power which carries us over obstacles on the crest of a wave, while hesitation and delay leave us stranded in shoal water. If we would follow the pillar, we must follow it at once.

A heart that waits and watches for God's direction, that uses common sense as well as faith to unravel small and great perplexities, and is willing to sit loose to the present, however pleasant, in order that it may not miss the indications which say "Arise! this is not your rest" -- fulfills the conditions on which, if we keep them, we may be sure that He will guide us by the right way, and bring us at last to the city of habitation.

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