

# The Journey

GOD GIVES DAILY GUIDANCE TO HIS PEOPLE.

Overseas travel has been a privilege of mine. These trips have included walking tours of some historic sites such as the Forbidden City in Beijing, the Neuschwanstein Castle in Germany, Versailles in Paris, plus several ancient sites in Rome. Each time the tour guide would raise his or her “banner” so we could easily follow.

The walking tour in Beijing, China, stands out in my mind. Our young tour guide carried an unopened, brightly colored umbrella that stood out in stark contrast to the various colored pennants of other tour guides. As we stood in Tiananmen Square preparing to enter the Forbidden City, I was struck by the sight of literally thousands of tourists gathered in little groups under the “banners” of scores of tour guides. I was thankful that our tour guide’s brightly colored umbrella stood out in stark contrast. I couldn’t imagine getting lost in that crowd in a strange city where I didn’t know the language. My job was to keep the umbrella in sight. If I became distracted by all the fascinating sights within the Forbidden City, I could have easily become lost and left behind in this wondrous but unfamiliar place. The presence of that raised umbrella was a source of comfort and confidence as we wove our way through the various temples and palaces of this ancient site.

Wandering in an unknown place can be confusing and even frightening. There is comfort in knowing that we are with someone who knows the right way. For the Israelites as they prepared to leave Mount Sinai on their way to the land that God had promised to them, everything about the trip was marked by the unknown. All they had ever known was their little area of Egypt known as Goshen. The descendants of Jacob had lived in this northeast region of the Nile Delta for four hundred years. Suddenly they had left Egypt and entered into a great expanse of wilderness of which they knew nothing. Thankfully, God provided them with a guiding “marker.” This marker was a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. The nation learned early on that they were to obey the leading of God through this divine sign He had given them.

## UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

### Numbers 1:1–10:10

The book of Numbers is the fourth book of the Pentateuch written by Moses during the exodus event. This book covers the transitional period between the events at Mount Sinai and the preparation for entering the promised land that took place on the plains of Moab across the Jordan River from Jericho. Keep in mind that Moses faced a monumental task of taking a group of used-to-be slaves and forming them into a cohesive nation. Throughout the books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers, the tasks of providing laws of conduct, provisions for worship, regulations of that worship, and the organization for travel, protection, and war are outlined. The early chapters in Numbers continue that organization.

Included in Numbers 1, 3, and 4 were instructions for the various tasks given to the tribe of Levi. Their special responsibility was the oversight of the tabernacle and its furnishings. The tabernacle had been completed in the first day of the second year of the exodus (Ex. 40:2,17). These tasks were assigned to the Levites to facilitate worship in the tabernacle. Also, provision was made for transporting the tabernacle.

The organization of the Israelites continued in Numbers 2 as details are given as to the way the camp was to be set up. Because the worship of the Lord was central in all that the Israelites did, the tabernacle was centrally located in the camp with those who led and assisted in worship camped adjacent to the tabernacle. This would also provide physical protection from the enemies of Israel who sought to prevent their advance. The population figures given for each section east, south, west, and north were similar in size. Later in chapter 10, the marching order of the tribes and those moving the tabernacle would point to the ongoing importance of protecting the ark of the covenant and the tabernacle.

God had told the people, “You must be holy because I am holy” (Lev. 11:45). Numbers 5 takes up where many of the instructions in Exodus and Leviticus left off: holiness within the camp and within the nation was absolutely essential.

While the narration of the construction and set up of the tabernacle is recorded in Exodus 36–40, in Numbers 7 the offerings of dedication of the tabernacle are given. Note that in chapter 7:2-9, six wagons were given to the Levites for transporting the tabernacle. The ark of the covenant and the other sacred objects of the tabernacle were to be carried.

Numbers 8 details the purification/consecration of the Levites for service to God. With that, the congregation of Israel was ready to leave Mount Sinai. The children of Israel were now ready to move toward the land that had been promised to them centuries earlier.



## God's Presence (Num. 9:15-16)

God was with the Israelites as they journeyed from Mount Sinai to the plains of Moab. He directed them by fire at night and as a cloud by day. It was a continuous and visible appearance of God's glory.

### VERSE 15

**On the day the tabernacle was set up, the cloud covered the tabernacle, the tent of the testimony, and it appeared like fire above the tabernacle from evening until morning.**

The ever-present pillar of **cloud** by day and **fire** by night was a visible, assuring symbol of the presence of God that accompanied the Israelites throughout their journey from Egypt to the promised land of Canaan. This pillar of cloud first appeared when the Israelites left Egypt (Ex. 13:21-22). The pillar of cloud served as a protective shield for Israel when the chariots of the Egyptian Pharaoh pursued them (14:19-20). The pillar of cloud moved between the Israelites and Egyptians, protecting the Israelites as they prepared to cross the Red Sea. The book of Exodus closes with a summary statement of God's use of this pillar of cloud and fire to direct the journeying of the Israelites (40:34-38).

Exodus 14:19 indicates that "the angel of God" was present in the pillar of cloud. On several occasions in the Old Testament, the mention of "the angel of the LORD" was a reference to an appearance of the Lord Himself. Exodus 14:24 gives further insight: "the LORD looked down at the Egyptian forces from the pillar of fire and cloud." Because of these verses, some Bible expositors see this as a theophany, that is, a personal and physical manifestation of God to the Israelites. This was not an appearance in human form; rather it was in the form of the pillar of cloud and fire. "The angel of the LORD" appeared to Moses in "a flame of fire within a bush" (3:2). Frequently in the Old Testament clouds were

indicators of the presence of God. Other occasions where the cloud of God's presence and glory appeared include God's appearance on Mount Sinai (19:9,16), at the tent of meeting (33:7-11), and the dedication of the tabernacle (40:34).

The pillar of cloud/fire continuously rested over the **tabernacle** day and night. The Hebrew term for *tabernacle* comes from a verb meaning "to dwell." The tabernacle was God's chosen dwelling place among the Israelites. Details regarding the tabernacle, its furnishings, and so forth are found in Exodus 25-40. Exodus 40 records how after the construction of the tabernacle was completed, "the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle" (40:34). While in this instance the tabernacle was also called "the tent of meeting," this structure should not be confused with the smaller "tent of meeting" Moses set up outside the Israelite camp to meet with God after the golden calf incident (33:7-11).

The tabernacle is also called **the tent of the testimony** here as well as in several other places in both the Old and New Testaments ("tabernacle of the testimony," Ex. 38:21; Acts 7:44; see also Num. 18:2). This name was most likely applied to the tabernacle because it housed the ark of the covenant ("ark of the testimony," Ex. 25:22) which contained the Ten Commandments (Deut. 10:5). God had said He would meet with Moses and later the high priests above the mercy seat of the ark (Ex. 25:21-22). The mercy seat consisted of a lid with two golden cherubim that stood guard over the ark of the covenant. Both the tabernacle and the ark bore witness to the special relationship between God and His people.

### VERSE 16

**It remained that way continuously: the cloud would cover it, appearing like fire at night.**

The pillar of cloud/fire was a constant part of the Israelites' journey to the promised land. It was easily recognizable in contrast to all other clouds by its shape and fixed position over the tabernacle or in front of the marching line of the Israelites. Moses spoke of the presence of this pillar of cloud/fire as a clear sign of God's presence and watch care over the people He had chosen (Num. 14:14).

God's presence in the tabernacle was indicated by the cloud/fire remaining over it **continuously**. The pillar of cloud/fire first appeared on the first day the Israelites left Egypt and is last mentioned in Deuteronomy 31:14-15. The pillar was present "throughout all the stages of their journey" (Ex. 40:36,38).

Numbers 9:16 is a parallel verse to Numbers 9:15, essentially repeating the same information. In fact, much of Number 9:15-23 contains a repetition of the same thoughts. This may indicate that the passage is closely akin to Hebrew poetry or celebratory prose. Hebrew poetry is characterized by such things as parallel ideas and repetition of thought. This passage may be an echo of an earlier celebratory song or Hebrew poem rejoicing in God's presence among the Israelites.

In any case, the entire passage speaks volumes about the wonder of God's continual presence and guidance of the Israelites as they made their way through the wilderness. There is a sense of excitement and wonder in these verses describing the manifest presence of the God of the universe. The prayer of praise by the Levites and other leaders recorded in Nehemiah 9 recounted how even after the golden calf incident God did not abandon His people. "You did not abandon them in the wilderness because of your great compassion. During the day the pillar of cloud never turned away from them, guiding them on their journey. And during the night the pillar of fire illuminated the way they should go" (Neh. 9:19; see vv. 17-21).

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### Explore Further

Read the article on "Pillar of Fire and Cloud" on page 1270 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. While the Israelites had a visible symbol of God's presence among them, believers today do not have such visible reminders as a regular part of our lives. What are some ways you can know that God is present in your circumstances?

Why would including things like regular prayer, Bible study, and gathering with other Christians on a regular basis be helpful in seeing God's

- presence in your life and circumstances?
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## Faithful Direction (Num. 9:17-21)

The Israelites watched the pillar of cloud. When the cloud lifted from its place above the tabernacle and moved, the Israelites moved with it. They followed the cloud. When the cloud stopped moving and remained in one place, they stopped traveling and remained in that location. The Israelites journeyed or camped at the Lord's command.

## VERSE 17

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**Whenever the cloud was lifted up above the tent, the Israelites would set out; at the place where the cloud stopped, there the Israelites camped.**

God's presence with His people Israel pointed to their uniqueness among the peoples present in the land of Canaan. Later on the border of the promised land, Moses marveled to the people, "For what great nation is there that has a god near to it as the LORD our God is to us whenever we call to him?" (Deut. 4:7). This awareness of the presence of God with them gave the Israelites the certainty that He would also guide them throughout their journey to the land of Canaan.

Numbers 9:17-23 sets forth a continuing pattern of travel followed by encampment. It indicates the pattern of traveling—**Whenever the cloud was lifted up above the tent, the Israelites would set out; at the place where the cloud stopped, there the Israelites camped.**

The theme of this entire passage is the leadership of God. The position and movement of the cloud spoke the "orders for the day." Obviously, the position of the cloud was within sight of the entire camp of Israel—"visible to the entire house of Israel throughout all the stages of their journey" (Ex. 40:38). The words "the entire house of Israel" indicate that every household was responsible for obedience to the direction of God through the cloud. Again Exodus 40:38 affirms that God directed Israel through the cloud for the entire time they were journeying from Egypt to the promised land.

Moses, speaking from the plains of Moab at the end of their journey, portrayed this divine guidance with the picture of God carrying the Israelites "as a man carries his son all along the way you traveled until you reached this place" (Deut. 1:31). Here is an affirmation once again that the pillar of cloud/fire led them the entire time from Egypt to the cusp of the promised land.

## VERSE 18

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**At the LORD's command the Israelites set out, and at the LORD's command they camped. As long as the cloud stayed over the tabernacle, they camped.**

This verse continues the pattern of travel followed by encampment. Six times in verses 18-23 it is stated that the movement of the Israelites was **at the LORD's command** (italics added). The position and movement of the pillar of cloud/fire was a direct command from God as to whether the

Israelites should remain where they were encamped or break camp and move on with their journey. The nation of Israel was not traveling and camping at the discretion of Moses or Aaron or one of the tribal leaders. Instead, they were following direct guidance from God Himself. God was present and actively involved in this whole journey of the children of Israel from Egypt to Canaan.

#### VERSE 19

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**Even when the cloud stayed over the tabernacle many days, the Israelites carried out the LORD’s requirement and did not set out.**

The length of time of this wilderness wandering of the Israelites was forty years with one of those years spent at Mount Sinai. What we know about those years is contained in the books of Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. One aspect of their journey was that the travels and encampments of the Israelites were irregular in length. Numbers 9:19-22 indicate this irregularity with such phrases as **many days**, “a few days” (v. 20), “only from evening until morning” (v. 21), “two days, a month, or longer” (v. 22). But what from a human perspective may have seemed to be random was from God’s perspective working out His purposes and plans according to His sovereign will. No doubt each period of travel and encampment played a role in shaping the generation who would enter the promised land into the nation they would become. To gain a feel for the Israelites’ travels during those years, see the listing of stops in Numbers 33.

Part of the Israelites’ training was that they **carried out the LORD’s requirement** (“kept the charge of the LORD,” ESV, KJV; “obeyed the LORD’s order,” NIV). This phrase seems to be more than just following the Lord’s command to travel or encamp. The Hebrew word for *requirement* is a different word from “command” (Num. 9:18,20,23). It has the meanings of “responsibility,” “duty,” “service,” “obligation,” “guard,” “watch.” The term for *carried out* is used of God’s command that the Levites were to “watch over” the tabernacle (Num. 1:53). In this case, the term carries the meaning of “guard duty.” The whole idea was that the Levites were to stand watch over the tabernacle and its sacred furnishing. They were to ensure that no Israelite violated the sacredness of the tabernacle by approaching the tabernacle inappropriately.

In the case of the other tribes of Israel, who were encamped at a distance surrounding the four sides of the tabernacle (2:1-34), the use of the same language suggests that the tribes also had a duty to watch over the

tabernacle as well, standing guard and protecting it from any external threats from enemies while they were encamped.

#### VERSES 20-21

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**Sometimes the cloud remained over the tabernacle for only a few days. They would camp at the LORD’s command and set out at the LORD’s command. Sometimes the cloud remained only from evening until morning; when the cloud lifted in the morning, they set out. Or if it remained a day and a night, they moved out when the cloud lifted.**

These two verses continue the pattern of camp, travel, and camp again, emphasizing the irregular lengths of stay at various locations on the journey to Canaan. Because the amount of time at each encampment was not spelled out by God beforehand, the Israelites needed to be prepared both to stay for an extended period or move at a moment’s notice. Note again the emphatic statement that **they would camp at the LORD’s command and set out at the LORD’s command**. Again, the cloud’s movement or lack thereof served as the indicator of whether God wanted the Israelites to remain at or leave from their present location.

The text also indicates that the Israelites were obedient to God’s directions. How refreshing that this text highlights the ready obedience of the children of Israel to God’s commands. This certainly would not always be the pattern of the nation in the years to come, neither in the wilderness nor in the promised land.

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#### **Explore Further**

Just as God was present with the Israelites at the tabernacle and later the temple, so too He is present with us today through His Holy Spirit who indwells every believer. God has promised never to leave us or forsake us (Heb. 13:5-6). He has also promised us that nothing can ever separate us from Him and His love for us (Rom. 8:31-39). How can knowing these promises encourage you in the days ahead? Consider memorizing Romans 8:37-39 as an assurance of God’s presence and love you can draw upon in times when you need such reassurance.

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## Active Obedience (Num. 9:22-23)

The Israelites were faithful to follow God’s direction regardless of the amount of time spent traveling or camping. Whether it was two days or a month, the people carefully followed God’s direction.

### VERSE 22

**Whether it was two days, a month, or longer, the Israelites camped and did not set out as long as the cloud stayed over the tabernacle. But when it was lifted, they set out.**

Note again the repetition of thought concerning the cloud and its movements guiding the people. The formula of departure and encampment is again prominent. The signal to move was the cloud being **lifted** from over **the tabernacle**. Until then, whether it was **two days, a month, or longer**, the Israelites **did not set out**. Verses 22-23 further highlight an important theme repeated over and over in the focal passage: the exacting obedience to God’s directions given through the pillar of cloud/fire. Again, as we will see in the following sessions, the Israelites’ obedience here stands in sharp contrast to the many occasions during their journey when they complained against God. They exhibited disbelief and ungratefulness throughout the journey to the promised land.

### VERSE 23

**They camped at the LORD’s command, and they set out at the LORD’s command. They carried out the LORD’s requirement according to his command through Moses.**

This verse summarizes the whole of this passage: **They camped at the LORD’s command, and they set out at the LORD’s command**. The Hebrew term for *command* literally means “mouth” and by extension refers to speech or commands.

Once again, there is a reference to carrying out **the LORD’s requirement** (see v. 19). This included the watch over the tabernacle that God required from the Levites (Num. 1:53) and the people (9:19). The tabernacle and the worship of the Lord were central to the life of the nation. Nothing was more important than the presence and glory of the Lord.

**Moses** is mentioned for the very first time in this section outlining God’s guidance of the nation through the pillar of cloud/fire. The text clearly indicates that God was the one leading and guiding, while Moses was simply God’s conduit for His commands.

This visible symbol of God’s presence, the pillar of cloud/fire, was such a monumental part of the exodus event that it is written about in a variety of places throughout Scripture. In addition to the references in the Pentateuch (Genesis–Deuteronomy), the pillar is mentioned in such Scripture passages as Nehemiah 9:12,19; Psalms 78:14; 99:7; 105:39; Isaiah 4:5; and 1 Corinthians 10:1-2. Clearly this experience of God’s presence and guidance left a major impression on the nation of Israel.

Beyond that, during the Festival of Tabernacles the miraculous presence of God in the pillar of cloud/fire was memorialized by the lighting of four enormous menorahs, or candelabra, in the temple courtyard. It is claimed in the Mishnah (collection of Jewish oral laws) that the light from these huge menorahs filled Jerusalem with light to the extent that there wasn’t a dark courtyard in the city.<sup>1</sup> The lighting of these menorahs would have been a poignant reminder to the worshipers of God’s guidance in the wilderness wanderings of the children of Israel. Even more significant is that during a particular Festival of Tabernacles, Jesus declared, “I am the light of the world. Anyone who follows me will never walk in the darkness but will have the light of life” (John 8:12). While God led the Israelites through the pillar of cloud/fire during their journey from Egypt to the promised land, followers of Christ now have the assurance of Jesus’s divine presence within them in the Person of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:9-11; Gal. 4:6). As we follow Jesus Christ, we will never walk in darkness again. He promises never to leave or forsake us (Heb. 13:5-6), and through Him we have eternal life (John 3:16).

### Explore Further

God’s guidance in life is vitally important, but acting in obedience to that guidance is even more critical. God’s guidance is there for our benefit and protection. But without obedience, God’s guidance is of little value. Read the article “Obedience” on pages 1176–1177 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. According to the article, what should motivate believers to obey God? What is the relationship between trust in God and obedience to His commands? What does a lack of obedience in the life of a believer indicate? What is the fruit of obedience? Of disobedience? (See Gal. 5:16-25.)

1. F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), 206, note 1.