

Numbers 9:15-23

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The time for the Israelites to leave Sinai and to go to Canaan was drawing near. The only way they were going to complete the journey was if their LORD dwelt in their midst in order to guide them, protect them, and provide for them. Now that the tabernacle was completed, the LORD entered the tabernacle. He appeared as a cloud during the day and as fire during the night. When the cloud lifted from the tabernacle, the camp would move to the next destination. When the cloud rested on the tabernacle, they camped until the cloud lifted again.

Verses 15 – 23 recount the coming of the cloud of the LORD’s presence upon the tabernacle. The account of the LORD descending to the tabernacle was recorded in Exodus 40:34 – 38. Here, it stated again that *on the day that the tabernacle was erected the cloud covered the tabernacle, the tent of the testimony* (v. 15). The *cloud* was the same one that guided Israel out of Egypt after the tenth and last plague (Exodus 13:21f). This cloud protected the Israelites at the Red Sea (Exodus 14:19ff), and exhibited the glory of the LORD in the wilderness (Exodus 16:10). It was a visible indication of the LORD’s presence with His people (Exodus 19:9 et al.).

As described in Exodus, *in the evening it was like the appearance of fire over the tabernacle, until morning* (Exodus 13:22). In Exodus 13:21 – 22 and 14:24, it was called the “pillar of fire.” Here, it was described *like the appearance of fire*, giving the idea that it was not actual fire but a type of fire-like glow that lit up the cloud.

The presence of the cloud over the tabernacle never went away—it *was continuously* present (v. 16), meaning *the cloud would cover it by day, and the appearance of fire by night*. Apparently, the cloud covered just the tabernacle, not the whole camp.

The LORD established a system by which He would tell His people when to travel and when to camp. The plan was that *whenever the cloud was lifted from over the tent, afterward the sons of Israel would then set out; and in the place where the cloud settled down, there the sons of Israel would camp* (v. 17). So Israel was to follow the cloud wherever it went.

The Hebrew word for *settled down* is the Hebrew word “shakan,” on which the phrase “Shekinah glory” is based. It stresses the idea to the LORD’s glory “dwelling” amongst His people. Also, the Hebrew word for “tabernacle” (“mishkan”) is also related to the Hebrew verb “shakan.” It signified that the tabernacle was the LORD’s dwelling place.

In John 1:14, it states that Jesus “dwelt” among the Jews. This word (Greek “skenow”) means “to dwell in a tent,” and it is a reference to the Old Testament tabernacle. In effect, Jesus, being the “Shekinah glory,” “tabernacled” among His people to guide them and deliver them.

There seemed to be no set schedule concerning when the Israelites camped and when they moved to the next destination. Nor were they allowed to camp and move on when they wanted

to. It simply was that *at the command of the Lord the sons of Israel would set out, and at the command of the Lord they would camp* (v. 18). That is, *as long as the cloud settled over the tabernacle, they remained camped*. Their trek to the Promised Land was based on the LORD's timing, not their own.

This was true *even when the cloud lingered over the tabernacle for many days* (v. 19). In this case, *the sons of Israel would keep the Lord's charge and not set out*. This was true *if sometimes the cloud remained a few days over the tabernacle* (v. 20). In this case, it was *according to the command of the Lord they remained camped*.

It was also *according to the command of the Lord they set out*. They camped when He wanted them to camp, and they *set out* when He wanted them to. This was the case *even if sometimes the cloud remained from evening until morning, when the cloud was lifted in the morning, they would move out* (v. 21). It did not matter *if it remained in the daytime and at night, whenever the cloud was lifted, they would set out*.

It did not matter how long the cloud remained over the tabernacle; the Israelites would know to camp. This was true *whether it was two days or a month or a year that the cloud lingered over the tabernacle, staying above it* (v. 22). No matter how long the cloud hovered over the tabernacle, *the sons of Israel remained camped and did not set out*. However, *when it was lifted, they did set out*. It was all based on the LORD's timing. The conclusion of the matter was this—*at the command of the Lord they camped, and at the command of the Lord they set out* (v. 23). The actions of the Israelites were to be based completely on the “command of the LORD.” And when it came to moving or camping, the LORD expressed His command with the cloud.

The people were obedient to this—they *kept the Lord's charge, according to the command of the Lord through Moses*. The theme of obedience to the LORD's command is a major theme in the book of Numbers. The LORD did not tell them beforehand, He just expected them to follow Him. This could be an illustration to all His followers that He is always leading, and we should always trust Him to lead us.

It is striking that the phrase “the command of the LORD” is repeated seven times in these verses. It is as if the LORD was stressing to His people the importance of obedience. All they had to do was look at the cloud, and they would know the will of the LORD. Today, believers have the indwelling Holy Spirit guiding and illuminating His church as to what His will is (1 Thessalonians 4:3; Romans 8:14-15, 26 – 27). We also have the Scriptures, the Word of God, to guide us (2 Timothy 3:16 – 17).

Biblical Text

¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ So it was continuously; the cloud would cover it *by day*, and the appearance of fire by night. ¹⁷ Whenever the cloud was lifted from over the tent, afterward the sons of Israel would then set out; and in the place where the cloud settled down, there the sons of Israel would camp. ¹⁸ At the command of the Lord 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.¹⁹ 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.²⁰ 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.²¹ 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.²² 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.²³ 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.