

When we were flying back from Montreal, we went through a huge white cloud. It was so bright in there, I couldn't even look out – it was like staring into the sun, it was so bright. When we got out of the cloud, looking down at the ground, I could see all the houses and farms in the large shadow of the cloud. I thought how from the ground, the cloud covered the light and made everything appear dark. However, from our vantage point, the cloud was a small part of a bigger picture.

Sometimes when we're in a difficult period, the times when there is a cloud hanging over us, we tend to see the obvious and stop there. We cry out, "Why God?!" and hope that our despair stirs sympathy in God's heart to make it stop. However, maybe God has placed a cloud there for a purpose and we just aren't looking at the cloud the right way. Maybe we're looking at the cloud from the ground up and we need to see the cloud as part of a bigger picture. Maybe we're looking at the obvious when we should be looking deeper.

This reminds me of when we were children and we would lay back on the grass and stare at the clouds and we would see a horse or a face. There was always that one person who saw something more – "That one looks like my mom cooking taking a cake out of the oven" or "I see a girl with long hair sitting at a computer surfing the Internet." We would look at the cloud and wonder, "What is he looking at?!" So it is with our cloud. We struggle through our problem never looking to see what is really going on, what is God doing through this, what am I learning as a Christian...but instead we ask for prayers to have this cloud disappear.

But should we really want the clouds to disappear? James 1:2-4 "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything." We should consider it pure joy when we find ourselves in the shadow of the cloud. The testing that we are going through teaches us how to persevere. We have talked about spiritual disciplines in the past and we have learned that the disciplines teach us how to do things we really don't want to do and how to abstain from things we really desire. These spiritual disciplines help us to learn how to deal with situations when they occur. In the same way, these tests that we undergo, the clouds that we are in the shadow of, they are there to teach us as well. James specifically mentions perseverance. We learn how to persevere when we are going through difficult times. These lessons help us persevere later when we face other, more difficult, trials than these. However, when we ask God to take these things away, we are the losers. We don't see the lesson that God is teaching us. We do not learn to persevere. James says that perseverance brings us to maturity and completeness. When we ask God to take that away, we are being immature and certainly not complete Christians.

Let's not ask God to take away the cloud, but instead, let's ask God to help us through this period. 1 Peter 1:6-7 "So be truly glad! There is wonderful joy ahead, even though it is necessary for you to endure many trials for a while. These trials are only to test your faith, to show that it is strong and pure. It is being tested as fire tests and purifies gold-- and your faith is far more precious to God than mere gold. So if your faith remains strong

after being tried by fiery trials, it will bring you much praise and glory and honor on the day when Jesus Christ is revealed to the whole world.” (NLT) We will suffer, but the suffering brings us to a different place. It allows us to become purer, more refined. As we undergo the suffering of being under the cloud, we become better Christians and as we stand strong through those times, we become great witnesses for Jesus!

A final example occurs in Exodus. Ex 20:20-21 “Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid; for God has come in order to test you, and in order that the fear of Him may remain with you, so that you may not sin." So the people stood at a distance, while Moses approached the thick cloud where God was.” There was thunder and lightning in the cloud and the people were so afraid that they didn’t want to even listen and hear God from the cloud. But Moses explained to them that the cloud was good. Yet they still did not want to go near the cloud. They were afraid of the cloud. They wanted the cloud to go away. They wanted someone else to deal with the cloud, as long as it wasn’t them. This is how we treat the clouds in our lives, even though we KNOW God is in it!

This also allows us to see a biblical truth – that God uses clouds throughout the Old and New Testaments. God spoke through the clouds, came in the clouds and will come again in the clouds. We see in Numbers 9:15-22 “On the day the tabernacle, the Tent of the Testimony, was set up, the cloud covered it. From evening till morning the cloud above the tabernacle looked like fire. ¹⁶That is how it continued to be; the cloud covered it, and at night it looked like fire. ¹⁷Whenever the cloud lifted from above the Tent, the Israelites set out; wherever the cloud settled, the Israelites encamped. ¹⁸At the LORD's command the Israelites set out, and at his command they encamped. As long as the cloud stayed over the tabernacle, they remained in camp. ¹⁹When the cloud remained over the tabernacle a long time, the Israelites obeyed the LORD's order and did not set out. ²⁰Sometimes the cloud was over the tabernacle only a few days; at the LORD's command they would encamp, and then at his command they would set out. ²¹Sometimes the cloud stayed only from evening till morning, and when it lifted in the morning, they set out. Whether by day or by night, whenever the cloud lifted, they set out. ²²Whether the cloud stayed over the tabernacle for two days or a month or a year, the Israelites would remain in camp and not set out; but when it lifted, they would set out.” God came to the people in a cloud. They followed the cloud as it guided them through the desert. When the cloud stopped, so did they. When the cloud moved, so did they. This went on for the entire time they were wandering in the desert. God is in the cloud! We need to recognize that the cloud can be guiding us through the desert!

How hard it would have been to be an atheist at that time! All one had to do was look up and see the cloud leading the people or God speaking in the clouds. And God not only guided and spoke by the clouds, but protected them as well. Exodus 14:19-20 “Then the angel of God, who had been traveling in front of Israel's army, withdrew and went behind them. The pillar of cloud also moved from in front and stood behind them, coming between the armies of Egypt and Israel. Throughout the night the cloud brought darkness to the one side and light to the other side; so neither went near the other all night long.”

God protected His people and He used the cloud to do it. Sometimes, the cloud is actually protecting us.

We also have the opportunity to see how God will use clouds in the future. Daniel 7:13 "In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence." Jesus will be the fulfillment of Daniel's prophecy. He has already come to save us from our sins. He will come again, but this time, not as savior but as judge. Jesus himself tells us. Matthew 24:30 "At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory." Also, when the Jewish leaders who wanted to see Jesus destroyed, asked him if he was the awaited Messiah, Jesus says in Mark 14:62 "I am," said Jesus. "And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven."

We see that Jesus will come again in the clouds to judge the world. The world will tremble when they see this, but we Christians will be with him. We will not be afraid of the clouds. We will not want the clouds to disappear. We will cry 'Hallelujah!' at the return of the King! Revelation 1:7 "Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him. So shall it be! Amen."

But that still is not all. When I say we will be with him, I mean that literally. 1 Thessalonians 4:17 "After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever." The Thessalonians were afraid that their dearly departed would not be part of the Eternal plan. But Paul explains that first they will be raised up and then we will also be caught up with them in the clouds. And what happens? We meet Jesus in the air. The Greek word is AER and it means specifically the lower atmosphere, the air that we can breathe. It is not the heavens but the air in which all creatures live. And we will meet Jesus there but not before we are caught up in the clouds. This is the same way that Jesus first went up to heaven. Acts 1:9-11 "After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. "Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven." Jesus was taken up in a cloud and he will return in a cloud.

And so we return to where I started, in a plane above the clouds in the air, thinking about how differently the clouds look from that perspective. We can look at the clouds from our perspective and ask God to take them away. But if we look at the clouds from God's perspective, we see there is much more than meets the eye. We can choose to see the simple and the obvious. Or we can choose to see what lies behind the obvious. By choosing to see the clouds in our lives as a testing that brings maturity and completeness, we bring glory to Christ as we learn to persevere. And as we change our perspective on

the clouds, we get the ability to see the good that clouds can bring. Because it is God who lives in the clouds and He is using the clouds to guide us and protect us and will use the clouds in the future to bring us back to himself. Let's not pray for the removal of the clouds from our lives, but instead, let's thank God for all our trials. Sounds backwards, I know. But when we thank God for the troubles in our lives, we are giving God sovereignty, and that brings growth in our Christian journey.