

THE PILLAR OF CLOUD AND FIRE

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Reading: Exodus 13 and 14

What does it mean to us when we say that the Lord is present with us or is close to us? The story of the Israelites being saved from the Egyptians and crossing the Red Sea gives answers to this question.

The Egyptian army that started to chase after the Israelites had everything they needed. They had chariots and horsemen and weapons and trained soldiers. The Israelites had the presence of the Lord. That presence was beautifully pictured by a pillar—a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.

Something that no one could see was that the pillar was actually made up of many angels (see *Arcana Coelestia* 8192). And the Lord was present in the middle of this great host of angels. This meant that “the presence of the Lord was constant” because the people could always see the pillar (see *Arcana Coelestia* 8110). We are told in Exodus that “He did not take away the pillar of cloud by day or the pillar of fire by night from before the people” (13:22).

Picture in your imagination what that pillar of cloud did. As the Egyptian army came nearer to the Children of Israel, the cloud moved. It had been in front of the Israelites, leading them. But then it went around behind them. “And the Angel of God, who went before the camp of Israel, moved and went behind them; and the pillar of cloud went from before them and stood behind them” (*Exodus* 14:19).

Why did this happen? The pillar did two things: it provided light and guidance for the Israelites, but it also hid them from their enemy. The cloud “came between the camp of the Egyptians and the camp of Israel. Thus it was a cloud and darkness to the one, and it gave light by night to the other, so that the one did not come near the other all that night” (*Exodus* 14:20).

We are told in the Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church that if evil spirits could rise into heaven, they would be blinded by the light and would see nothing. The light would be like darkness to them. The pillar served to hide the Lord’s people, the way the great wings of a bird can hide its chicks. Thus we read this prayer in the Psalms: “Keep me as the apple of Your eye; hide me under the shadow of Your wings, from the wicked who oppress me, from my deadly enemies who surround us” (*Psalms* 17:8,9).

A person who is surrounded by evil spirits or enemies is also surrounded even more closely by something far stronger—the Lord’s protection. We see this in the Children of Israel crossing the Red Sea, with the sea like walls on either side of them. When Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, the Lord caused a strong east wind to blow all that night. The wind caused the water in the sea to part,

leaving a dry path in the center. “ So the children of Israel went into the midst of the sea on the dry ground, and the waters were a wall to them on their right hand and on their left” (Exodus 14:22). These walls represented the truth that “the Lord is present, and the presence of the Lord puts away evil and falsity on every side” (*Arcana Coelestia* 8206).

Just as the cloud was a darkness and confusion to the Egyptians and a help to the Lord’s people, so the waters of the sea which later crashed down and drowned the Egyptians were like a wall of safety for the Children of Israel.

The Children of Israel going right into the middle of the sea and having walls of protection on either side calls to mind another wall in an equally amazing story. Emanuel Swedenborg, who was chosen by the Lord to reveal the truths of the Heavenly Doctrine was once let down into something much more dangerous than the sea. He was let down into hell itself. Yet he was safe there. He wrote, “I noticed clearly that a sort of column was surrounding me. This column grew greater. Then I was given to know that this was ‘the wall of bronze’ mentioned in the Word (in Jeremiah 15:20). It consisted of angels, so that I could be sent down...and yet remain unharmed” (*Arcana Coelestia* 699).

The protection of Swedenborg in the midst of hell is amazing. And we also have far more protection than we might imagine. Here is what we are told:

Unless the Lord defended a person every moment, yea, even the smallest part of every moment, he would instantly perish, in consequence of the indescribably intense and mortal hatred which prevails in the world of spirits against the things relating to love and faith toward the Lord. The certainty of this fact I can affirm, having been now for some years (notwithstanding my remaining in the body) associated with spirits in the other life, even with the worst of them, and I have sometimes been surrounded by thousands, to whom it was permitted to spit forth their venom, and infest me by all possible methods, yet without their being able to hurt a single hair of my head, so secure was I under the Lord’s protection (*Arcana Coelestia* 59).

A good answer to the question of what the Lord’s presence means is *safety*. When the Children of Israel reached the other shore and the Egyptians were drowned, they were filled with joy in the safety that they felt. They had known enough danger to realize how wonderful safety is, and they sang a song of praise and thanksgiving to the Lord. Here is some of what they sang:

I will sing to the Lord, for He has triumphed gloriously....
The Lord is my strength and song, and He has become my salvation....
You in Your mercy have led forth the people whom You have redeemed;
You have guided them in Your strength to Your holy habitation....
The Lord shall reign forever and ever (Exodus 15:1,2,13,18).

Amen.