

## **Partaking in the Mysteries 8-25-24**

1 Kings 8:[1, 6, 10-11], 22-30, 41-43

Psalm 84

Ephesians 6:10-20

John 6:56-69

One of my favorite parts of living in the mountains is the way the clouds sink down and envelope them. To me, it's one of the most beautiful things in the world. Have you ever found yourself in one of those clouds? I have one memory I will never forget! The camp in Colorado where I used to work was located above 9 thousand feet. We were really far up. I was responsible for the horses, and we had hundreds of acres of pasture. We typically had about 50 horses and they were mostly kept together in a single herd. In the morning, I'd go out and whistle and they all come thundering in for breakfast. It was one of my favorite parts of the job, truly incredible. One winter morning, we'd had a storm overnight and the ground was covered in snow. The sun was coming up, but it was on the other side of a thick layer of cloud that reached all the way to the ground. The whole world was white. That morning, I think the horses were as disoriented as I was because when I whistled, rather than running into the catch-pen, they started running in circles around me. The clouds were so thick, I could only see a head here and a tail there as they whinnied and ran. The sun was backlighting the clouds, and it was the most disorienting combination of white light and no ability to see through it. The moment didn't last long, the clouds eventually lifted enough, and everyone got where they needed to be safely. But I will never forget the way it felt, unspeakable beauty and awe mixed

with fear. Whenever I think of the Hebrew's glory cloud, I think about that experience.

The cloud that filled Solomon's temple is the glory we typically hear referred to as the shekinah glory. It's the same glory that enveloped the top of Mount Sinai, the glory that filled the tabernacle in the wilderness, the glory that reflected so brightly on Moses' face that after being in the tabernacle, forced him to wear a veil because his glorified face was freaking everybody out. It's the glory that took the shape of the pillar of cloud and fire leading God's people out of their wilderness exile. It's a familiar Biblical concept, but what is glory really? This concept appears so often in Hebrew literature that the rabbis, when referring to it, gave it the Aramaic name "shekinah" even though that word doesn't exist in the text itself. This glory cloud was a symbol of God's presence and protection. It was understood as the dwelling place of God. The word itself offers us the sense that we understand this presence, this cloud, this glory. But even though the concept is familiar, the experience of it is a mystery.

The Israelites experienced the shekinah externally, but once Jesus came, that glory was housed within him. Saint John speaks of us beholding God's glory in Jesus, using the imagery of the shekinah. When we recognize Christ as the dwelling place of God, it makes more sense. But it's still a mystery. Even Jesus struggled to help people understand this concept. He was often a cryptic teacher, speaking in metaphors and imagery his listeners didn't understand. But, when he taught them to eat his flesh and drink his blood, they were

repulsed. Perhaps it's challenging for us to understand just how uncomfortable this teaching was because we're so familiar with our wafers and wine. But when he first said this, he was standing before them in a human body. They only had half the story, and they didn't know what was coming. From a literal perspective, he was endorsing cannibalism. From a spiritual perspective, he was inviting them into participation with his glory.

Even the apostle Paul struggles to explain these things. He too calls this the mystery of the gospel. But for Paul, experiencing the mystery was a bit more practical. He had more information than the first followers of Jesus, so he understood more about Jesus' glory and our participation with it. His teaching demonstrates his expectation that our lives will be marked by Christ's glory, and he explains practical ways to live this out. He speaks of things like righteousness, faith, and prayer.

Most of us are probably familiar with the battle imagery Paul employs to combat evil. Of all the protective gear Saint Paul instructs Christians to put on, there is only one offensive weapon mentioned. The sword of the spirit. Paul calls this the word of God. You don't need to raise your hands, but how many of us have been taught this "sword" is the Bible? Most of us have been told, because of this passage, the importance of knowing the Bible as an offensive tool against the enemy. Knowing the Bible, reading it, memorizing it, and taking comfort in it is indeed hugely important. Please hear me say that none of us know our Bible as well as we could. Read it. Study it. But also hear me say that

when Paul gave this instruction, there was no Bible. Paul was not referring to the Bible. The Hebrew Bible Paul had, wouldn't be canonized until 600 years later. While we maintain many of the scriptures early Christians had, we've also discarded many of them. The gospels didn't exist in the way we have them, and Paul wasn't even finished writing the epistles. The Word of God Paul was speaking about, this sword of the spirit, is actually the "words" of God.

If you're like me, it's difficult to understand the distinction. So, let's break it down. Words are the things we use to communicate. They are ideas we put language around. They take abstract concepts and clarify them so that what one person knows, or experiences, can be shared, so it can be known or experienced by someone else. The Word of God includes sacred writings, it includes the Bible. But in Paul context, the word of God is the communication of God to us. Paul's uses "Rhema" to describe the kind of words he meant. The Greek word Rhema can mean an activity or an event, not just a spoken word. Words are matters to be discussed, personal experiences, or testimonies. God spoke to us through Jesus, through his words and through his actions. God's word made flesh was Jesus, God's glory shown in a human, the dwelling place of God among us. If you are a Christian, you believe Jesus is alive and among us still. If you are a Christian, you believe that spiritually taking Jesus' body into oneself is an identification with this living person, with Jesus. It's a mystery. Feeding on Christ is taking the glory of God into ourselves, our body and our spirit. It's allowing our lives to be transformed by God.

So, when Paul says to take up the sword of the spirit, which is the word of God. He is saying that we should allow our words to become God's words. Our participation with Christ in the Holy Mysteries, our experience of the shekinah, ought to transform everything about us so that what comes out of us should mirror the glory of God. When we feed on Christ, we become the sword of the spirit, our words and actions transform into the very words and actions of God. If we allow ourselves to truly behold these mysteries, the people around us should begin to hear it, see it, feel it.

Some of us have tremendous stories of observing the power and glory of God. Others do not. Some of us have to work harder to experience the reality behind the mysteries. For all of us, the divine life is a mystery. Some of us know it in our bones. Some of us hang onto shreds of belief because we don't have anywhere else to go. For all of us, feeding on Christ and beholding his glory is Eternal Life.

May we be a people who dwell under the shekinah glory of God, feeding on the Holy Mysteries, so utterly transformed by the divine life that even our words become the very words of God.