

THE UPWARD CALL

*Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet;
but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead,
**I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God
IN CHRIST JESUS.**
(Philippians 3:13-14 NASB)*

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Great Cloud of Witnesses

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The New Testament contains several references to clouds. The Greek word for *cloud* is *nephele*, which denotes a cloudy, shapeless mass covering the heavens that, metaphorically speaking, refers to a dense multitude. The origin of the word indicates that it could refer to a mass of rock, signifying a mass of anything. Thus, it conveys the picture of a dense mass.

A study of the cloud references reveals that clouds refer to the witness of the faithful conquerors in Christ, whether dead or alive. Let us start with the dead.

Therefore, since we have so great a cloud [nephele] of witnesses surrounding [encompassing] us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.... (Hebrews 12:1 NASB [CV])

It is fascinating how often this verse is presented as if the faithful dead are not really dead but alive in heaven, as if it were a big stadium, and all these dead but alive *in* death ones [oxymoronic concept] are in the bleachers of this heavenly stadium, looking down, and literally cheering us on. This might help to bolster the erroneous view that there are dead ones in heaven today, but this is not what the writer of the Hebrews epistle meant, nor is it the teaching of scripture. The witnesses are all those mentioned in the previous chapter of the epistle from Abel on down to the wanderers in the caves. All gained approval through their faith, but not one of them received what was promised. These saints are dead and awaiting the *better resurrection* (Hebrews 11:13, 35); none of them is watching from heaven.

The English Sublinear of the Concordant Greek Text uses the phrase *about-lying* for the translated word *encompassing* or *surrounding*. A cloud is lying about; meaning they are dead in the grave.

First, in this context, a cloud is merely a figure of speech for a mass of witnesses that has gone before us. A witness is one who testifies. Their testimony is the testimony of their lives of faith. This is what encompasses us or lies about us in the graves today. It is the witness of their faith that conquered or, we could say, of their conquering life. It is like Abel's blood that cries to God from the ground.

Second, clouds are mentioned in the snatching away in clouds of the saints at the *parousia* of the Lord (1 Thessalonians 4:17). The conquerors in Christ who hold to the testimony of Jesus are the ones who are snatched away. When all are snatched away, they are like a cloud (a mass) of witnesses. Whether actual physical clouds are involved is not the issue. The fact of the matter is that this great mass of people is a witness based on their faith exercised during their lives. The clouds are symbolic of their witness.

Third, the same thing is seen with our Lord Jesus as He was taken up and received in a cloud.

And after He had said these things, He was lifted up while they were looking on, and a cloud [nephele] received Him out of their sight. And as they were gazing intently into the sky while He was going, behold, two men in white clothing stood beside them. They also said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven." (Acts 1:9-11 NASB)

The fact that a cloud received Him indicates something of importance. He is the faithful and true Witness (Revelation 3:14), and the cloud that took Him up signified this fact.

Fourth, there are two more verses that deal with the coming of the Lord and clouds. The first one records Jesus being brought before the whole Council as He was about to face the cross (Matthew 26:59). They demanded to know whether He was the Christ, the Son of God, to which He responded:

Thou hast said: nevertheless I say unto you, Hereafter shall ye see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven [ouranos] (Matthew 26:64 KJV).

This was a rather strange thing to say to the men that accused Him and, ultimately, demanded His death as they rejected Him as the King of Israel. How could they have seen Him coming in the clouds of heaven? After all, Jesus spoke as if in that day they would see Him coming in the clouds of heaven. Shortly after, He would be seated at the right of God the Father, but how would they see this? When these rejecters of Christ stoned Stephen to death, surely, they did not see heaven opened up and the Son of Man standing at the right of God (Acts 7:55-57) as Stephen saw.

In the days that followed, there was only one way for them to see Him coming in the clouds, and that was by seeing the witness of His faithful disciples that had followed Him and that, after Calvary, at Pentecost, had received an earnest of the spirit (2 Corinthians 1:22; 5:5; Ephesians 1:14). The ecclesia in that day was the cloud of witnesses, many of whom were later martyred for their testimony. Consequently, the ones that rejected Christ saw Him in the dense mass, the cloud of witnesses born from above that were alive on earth at that time. These were the ones who were of the Way and later called Christians; a mass of little rocks or living stones built upon the Rock or the living, precious Stone.

But how did these rejecters of Christ see Him seated at the right hand of power? Again, they saw it in the faithful cloud of witnesses who were spiritually seated together with Christ Jesus among the celestials (Ephesians 2:6 CV). In other words, when they looked at Christians, the body of Christ, they saw the Head, figuratively speaking, sitting on the right hand of power. While He walked the earth, Jesus stated in various ways that if anyone saw Him, they saw the Father. In like fashion, in that day, as well as today, when one saw (sees) His body, he saw (sees) the Lord, the Head of His body.

If we put aside the ones that rejected Christ in that day and fast forward to our day, we discover that there are still a people who claim to be Jews, but they are not (Revelation 2:9), for they too reject Christ. A day is coming, and I believe soon, that these, who Jesus calls liars, will see Christ, the One they reject, come to this earth as His life is manifested in the sons of glory. This will be a prophetic fulfillment of Jesus' words to the Council over 2,000 years ago.

There is more to be gleaned from Jesus' words, for the word *heaven* comes from the Greek word *ouranos*, which is similar to the Greek word *oros*, which means "to rise; a mountain (as lifting itself above the plain)." The word *mountain* often refers to *kingdom*. Consequently, one could say that **He is coming in the glory (clouds) of His kingdom (of heaven).**

How will this glory be manifested? The answer lies in another verse about His coming.

Behold, he cometh with [nephele] clouds; and every eye shall see him, and they also which pierced him: and all kindreds of the earth shall wail because of him. Even so, Amen. (Revelation 1:7 KJV)

Most translations state "with the clouds." However, the article *the* is not in the Greek, so it seems that the KJV is a bit more accurate. The Greek word translated *with* is *meta*, which is a preposition that means "accompaniment or amid." Thus, the Lord will come amid clouds. If we take clouds to mean a witness [i.e., a mass rock (living stones) of witnesses], then perhaps a better way of stating it is: **Behold, a witness will accompany Him!** Or, yet another way of stating it is: **Behold, He will accompany a witness!** This witness is the company of conquerors that is glorified as He is glorified, the sons of glory (Romans 8:21; Hebrews 2:10).

Thus, we can conclude that, figuratively and spiritually, clouds refer to the witness of the faithful, either past (dead) or present (alive). A loud voice in heaven attests to this great cloud of witnesses **who hold to the testimony of Jesus** (Revelation 19:10).

"And they overcame him because of the blood of the Lamb and because of the word of their testimony, and they did not love their life even when faced with death." (Revelation 12:11 NASB)

May we be a great cloud, a massive rock, of witnesses in the days leading up to the coming of the Kingdom of our Lord!