

## **The Third and Forth Plagues: Gnats and Flies**

**Exodus 8:16-32**

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If you have your Bibles, I'd invite you to turn with me to Exodus, chapter 8, as we continue to work our way through the various plagues of Egypt. We're going to look at two tonight, both having to do with insects of some sort, the third and the fourth plagues. We've seen a number of themes emerge already. The sovereignty of God is very clear throughout this passage. It is clearly fitting as we see the God of Israel verses the Gods of Egypt, and so far two plagues into this business there is no question who is winning. This is going to be a rout by the time it's over. You know, it's sort of like when the Super Bowl gets into the second quarter, and it's already forty-four to nothing, and it just gets worse from there on out. Well, it's the same thing here. God's sovereignty is going to be questioned.

Another thing we've seen in the plague stories, however, is the theme of God making Himself known to the Egyptians in judgment and to His people in redemption. He has a purpose in displaying His sovereignty, and that purpose is that He would be known, that he would be reckoned with. You remember Pharaoh had early on, in his encounter with Moses, declared he didn't even know who the Lord, the God of Israel was. Had never heard of Him. Now any time Pharaoh makes a statement like that in the Exodus, watch what happens about a chapter later. It's a consistent pattern. Pharaoh makes sort of an outrageous statement, you may be assured that God is going to deal with Pharaoh about that statement pretty soon. We're going to see an example of that tonight. The Lord making Himself known has been another theme that we have seen.

We've seen God's sovereignty revealed in His mercy, even in the way the plagues are consecutive and gradual, the plagues increase in intensity. And each of those gradual increases gives Egypt the opportunity to repent, give Egypt the opportunity to turn back from its obvious rebellion against God. It gives Pharaoh the opportunity to acknowledge the Lord. And yet over an over we see Pharaoh hardening his heart. Tonight we're going to come to back to some of that but also in the two plagues we're going to look at tonight, we're going to see introduced at least two new themes to the passage as we work through it. So let's hear God's word beginning in verse 16:

Then the Lord said to Moses, say to Aaron out your staff and strike the dust of the earth, that it may become gnats through all the land of Egypt. And they did so. And Aaron stretched out his hand with his staff and struck the dust of the earth and there were gnats on man and beast. All the dust of the earth became gnats through all the land of Egypt. And the magicians tried with their arts to bring forth gnats but they could not. So there were gnats on man and beast. Then the magicians said to Pharaoh "This is the finger of God," but Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he did not listen as the Lord had said. Now the Lord said to Moses, rise early in the morning and present yourself before Pharaoh as he comes out to the water and say to him, "Thus says the Lord. Let My people go that they may serve Me. For if you will not let my people go, behold I will send swarms of insects on you and on your servants and on your people and into your houses and the houses of the Egyptians shall be full of swarms of insects and also the ground on which they dwell. But on that day I will set apart the land of Goshen where My people are living so that no swarms of insects will be there in order that you may know that I am the Lord in the midst of the land. And I will put a division between My people and your people. Tomorrow this sign shall occur. Then the Lord did so, and there came great swarms of insects of the house of Pharaoh and houses of his servants and the land was laid waste because of the swarms of insects in all the land of Egypt. And Pharaoh called for Moses and Aaron and said, "Go sacrifice to your God within the land." But Moses said, "It is not right to do so for we shall sacrifice to the Lord our God what is an abomination to the Egyptians. If we sacrifice what is an abomination before their eyes will they not then stone us? We must go three days journey into the wilderness and sacrifice to the Lord our God as He commands us." And Pharaoh said, "I will let you go that you may sacrifice to the Lord your God in the wilderness, only you shall not go very far away. Make supplication for me. Then Moses said, "Behold, I am going out from you, and I shall make supplication to the Lord that the swarms of insects may depart from Pharaoh, from his servants, from his people tomorrow. Only do not let Pharaoh deal deceitfully again in letting the people go to sacrifice to the Lord. So Moses went out from Pharaoh and made supplication to the Lord. And the Lord did as Moses asked, and removed the swarms of insects from Pharaoh, from his servants, and from the people. Not one remained. But Pharaoh hardened his heart this time also and he did not let His people go.

Amen, thus ends this reading of God's holy word. May He add his blessing to it. Let's pray.

Lord God, speak to Your people by Your word, instruct us in things you clearly would know and embrace and believe and be instructed by. Surprise us with things that we were not expecting, by applying your word to us through the Holy

Spirit in such a way that we are convicted, and strengthened and encouraged and built up through the truth of God. These things we ask in Jesus name, Amen.

We've got a lot of ground to cover and I propose to cover that ground by focusing on four or five things in these two plague accounts: Three things in the third plague and two things in the fourth plague. Perhaps I can outline the material for you and it will give you a better idea of where we are going. In verses 16 and 17, we see the Lord's command to Moses, and of course, also to Aaron with regard to the third plague. And we see Aaron carrying out the commands. I want to point something out in that passage about the sovereignty of God.

Then in verse 18 and the first part of 19 we see the failure of the Egyptian magicians. This is one of the new things that we are going to discover in the passage tonight. Egyptian magicians attempt to duplicate the miracle, they can't do it. And we see their confession given, especially in the first part of verse 19 and we're going to see something about the sovereignty of God over magic in that particular passage. That's the second thing we'll look at.

Thirdly, in verse nineteen the second half of the verse, at the very end of the play, we're going to see Pharaoh's hard-hearted obstinence displayed. And here we're going to see something about total depravity.

Then as we look over into the fourth plague, if you look at verses 20 through 24, for the first time a distinction is going to be explicitly said to be made by God between God and Egypt. And we see there something about God's special providence. That's a second new thing that we see in the passage that we're studying tonight.

And then finally if you look at verses 25 through 32, you'll see the negotiation between Moses and Pharaoh, the termination of the plague, Pharaoh's reneging on the promise that he has made, and in that passage, you're going to learn that it's going to be by verse that it's God who releases, God who frees Israel, not Pharaoh, and it's tied in to something that Pharaoh says, that God will respond to later on. So those are the five passages or parts of the passage we're going to take up tonight. Let's pick up then in verses 16 and 17.

## **I. God is sovereign over all life.**

Here we see the Lord giving a command to Moses and, of course, to Aaron in carrying out the third plague, and we learn something. We learn that God is sovereign over all of life all the way down to the dust from which we are made. As this plague begins, as you look at the first few words of verse 16, there is no warning to Pharaoh. You remember in the first two plagues Moses is told to go to Pharaoh first. Tell him what's coming. Okay, I'm about to cold cock

you. You see the fist? It's coming. In this plague there is no prior warning. In this plague, Moses and Aaron simply are told to carry it out unannounced. That may well be a sign of God's divine reprisal against Pharaoh. Pharaoh lied to Him at the end of the second plague. Now God visits him with a third plague without evening warning him. Pharaoh changed his mind and broke his promise and now God visits him with another plague without announcement. We are told by two phrases in verse 17 that the scale of this plague is vast. Notice that it is going to affect every man and beast. Notice that it is described as the source of this plague being the dust of the earth. I think that probably what is actually being spoken of is the numbers of the insects rather than necessarily originating source of the insects, but nevertheless, it is clear through both of those phrases and the dust of the earth that this plague is vast. In fact, *dust of the earth* in general in the book of Genesis is a phrase used to describe something that is innumerable. Remember back in Genesis verses 13 when God was speaking to Abraham and telling him how many descendants He was going to give him? He said there going to be as the dust of the earth. You won't be able to count them Abram. He says the same thing again to Jacob in Genesis, 28:14: Jacob, your descendants are going to be as the dust of the earth. And so this is a phrase that customarily means innumerable. And so God is saying there are going to be innumerable gnats or flying insects of some sort all over Egypt.

I might mention to you that the Hebrew is not specific here. Seminary students are looking at their Hebrew text, and trying to remember the vocabulary that they had been memorizing for the last six months. You will note that just like we saw with the frogs, the Hebrew says croakers. They weren't frogs. Hebrews weren't real familiar with frogs. So they called them croakers. And we translate in our Scriptures, frogs. Well, the same thing here. In this passage, it's hard to tell what the Hebrew is speaking of because the word that is used is usually small flying things. The Hebrews obviously weren't going to win any prizes in insect biology. Small flying things, that's the technical phrase that they employed in this passage. Are these gnats, are they midges? Some of you have been to the west Highlands of Scotland, during the summer months; and you've encountered midges. You will know, by the way, or some of you will know, that Philo actually thinks it's midges. That's what's being spoken of in this particular passage. If you have ever been vexed by midges then you know how horrible that particular thing is. I remember, by the way, by looking at this passage, that Alonzo Ramiriz when he graduated from college went to work as an engineer with a team of missionaries that were in the Amazon basin right off of the river. He made his way first by bus and then by boat, all the way to the place that he was going to be working in the Amazon, right near the source of the Amazon, which I didn't know until recently is in Peru. When he got there, he said, at the eating time they went out to the river to bathe. I said, "You're kidding, you bathed in the Amazon? There are piranhas in the Amazon." "Oh yeah," he said, "we bathe in the Amazon. I would not go in there having cut myself shaving." At any rate he said that the sound of the mosquitoes was like a gigantic aircraft landing. There were so many of them. I said, "You, of course, had medicine for malaria." He said, "No,

my brother, why would we have that?" No medicine for me. And he said that it would literally drive some people crazy. The sound of the swarms of the mosquitoes would literally drive some people mad. And, of course, you would be covered with them as you went down into the water. The only relief was to get underwater with them, and the minute you came up from the water, you were surrounded and covered by them again. That gives you some taste of what's happening here. These insects, they are as the dust of the earth. That image myself, my friend, suggests the end of the earth. That image itself, my friend, suggests the end of the Egyptians. They will be no more. We are created from the dust to the dust, we shall return their source and their gold will have been taken away.

This yet another warning from God against the Egyptians resistance. Resistance is futile, he is saying. This plague, you see, is both a nuisance and a humiliation to Egypt, and it is a sign, a warning ignored with peril. We come from the dust of the earth, we return to the dust of the earth; God will make this plague as numerous as the dust of the earth. Fred Hineman in his commentary said the reader is left with the image that there will no dust left in the entire country. That's how vast this scale of this plague is.

You see, in general, before we move on to the fourth plague that there is a progressive intensification in these successive plagues. As they come, they increase. They are more and more serious. And notice again we are told in these first three plagues, that God can use anything He wants to touch the Egyptians. He can use their water, He can use frogs, He can use gnats or midges, or whatever they are. He can use those kinds of things to bring down Egypt. You remember when we were in the midst of conflict with Libya and Colonel Kaddafi had made various threatening noises to the United States. And so we dropped a missile in on his house. Now the message was clear. We can get you anytime we want. We just wanted to let you know. Anytime we want, we can take you out. That's precisely what God is saying to Egypt. Anytime I want, this time I use gnats, anytime I want I can take you out. God can touch Egypt with His finger and bring them to dust. He is sovereign over all of life. That message is clear in all the plagues. That's the first thing we see.

## **II. No magic is equal to the power of God.**

Then when you look at verse 18 and 19, we see the failure of the Egyptians officials to duplicate the play, and we see their confession. And here again Moses is teaching us that there is no magic that is equal to the power of the Lord. The sorcerers work their arts again in verse 18, but for the first time they fail. We're never told that they ever again even attempt to compete with Moses and Aaron. I have to wonder whether Pharaoh was a bit relieved. You know. Okay, it's okay, don't need to duplicate that again. Whatever the case, however, their final defeat is not going to come until the plague of the boils. In Exodus, chapter

9, verse 11, where for the first time it will be mentioned that that plague will be visited upon them. And so Egypt's magic will be shown to finally be defeated by the Lord.

Now their confession is very important. They go back to Pharaoh, and they say, "This is the finger of God." Several things need to be noted about that. In fact, there are about four things that I'd like to mention to you about their use of that phrase. First of all, by the magicians saying, this is the finger of God, they are themselves acknowledging the plague, administered by Aaron at the command of Moses, they are acknowledging this plague as a supernatural event, beyond human control. Now you read commentator after commentator in the modern era that attempts to give you a naturalistic and rationalistic explanation of the plagues. Well this happened because this happened, and it was this time of the year, it was rainy season, and it was flooding; and there were dead frogs and then there were a bunch of insects swarming around all the bodies of the dead frogs, okay? But the Egyptian magicians who were there and would love to have taken refuge in that kind of a theory, do not say 'that this is the natural result of flooding and dead frogs and swarming insects around their dead carcasses.' They acknowledge it to be the finger of God. They have every reason not to acknowledge this to be the finger of God. And yet they themselves acknowledge it to be a supernatural event beyond human control. I suggest to you that that says something about modern approaches to interpretation that attempt to supply naturalistic and rationalistic explanations for what's happening here. This is clearly the finger of God, and even His enemies admit it.

Notice how that pattern will also follow, by the way, in the gospels. As the enemies of Christ are among the first to admit His supernatural character and power. Secondly, the finger of God is, of course, anthropomorphism; that is, it's using a human physical description or designation to indicate some truth about God. It does not remotely suggest, of course, that God has a body or a finger. It's a way of designating God's supernatural involvement in an event in human history. That, by the way, is important for your understanding of the Old Testament. Over and over God will use, from time to time, in His word, physical descriptions of Himself and His activity. His point is not to try and convince you He has a body. Far from it, every Hebrew child was raised on the *Shorter Catechism*, and they knew that 'God is a Spirit; and He has not a body like man.' But God uses those kinds of figures of speech to indicate His involvement in our experience.

Thirdly, notice that when the magicians met and report that this is God's doing, that they themselves are beginning to acknowledge God, just like the Lord had told Moses that He would make the Egyptians to do. They will know that I am the Lord. Isn't it interesting that in the plague account, the first people who are said to admit publicly that the plagues are the work of the God of Moses are the Egyptian sorcerers. God will cause the wrath of man to praise Him. This is the first public testimony in the plague cycle that these plagues are the work of God,

and not man or magic, it's the work of God.

Fourth and finally, note that the magicians do not say this is the finger of the Lord, they say this is the finger of God. They don't say this is the finger of Jehovah or this is the finger of Yahweh, they say this is the finger of Eloheim or God. They haven't gotten to the point yet, that Pharaoh will be brought to when the Lord, the one true God of Israel, is acknowledged. God must still compel that admission through further visitations. That admission through further visitations.

I remember an interesting conversation that went on between Doug Kelly and Allen Harman once in the midst of a faculty meeting, in which they said in Scotland it was not uncommon in days past for people who attended church and believed in God but who were not confessing believers to refer to God in their conversation simply as God. And then upon their conversion to begin to refer to Him as Lord by His Covenant Name.

You know, have you noticed that, by the way, in some of these athletes' testimony that sometimes comes out in the aftermath of some great sporting event. I always am looking for the ones who generically speak about God, and those who specifically speak about the Lord, or even about Jesus Christ. I'm always a little more comfortable with the testimony of those who are willing to name the name of their Lord. Whereas, oftentimes the more generic descriptions indicate less complete commitment to a biblical Christianity. At any rate, we see that distinction here; the Egyptian magicians refer to Him as God, but not as the Lord. The point of the passage though is that the Lord's power is greater than the magic of Egypt.

Third, and finally, with the third plague, we see this. At the end of verse 19, Pharaoh's hard-hardness and obstinance is displayed again. You know a blind man can't see by the light of the noonday sun. And Pharaoh is such a blind man. The magician's alarm and report does phase him. It only prompts him to harden his already stubborn heart. He is the poster child for the apostle Paul in Romans 9 of someone who rejects clear revelation. Pharaoh's problem is not that he doesn't have enough evidence. Pharaoh's problem is not that he doesn't have enough knowledge. Pharaoh's problem is a corrupt heart.

And I want to point one other thing here. Notice for the last time in the plague story, you'll see this phrase, *as the Lord had said*. Four times that phrase is used. In the first part of Moses' accounts of the plagues, as the Lord had said, and every time it accompanies something very interesting. It accompanies an affirmation of the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. In other words, when it is reported that Pharaoh's heart is hardened or was hardened, was hardened by the Lord, hardened by himself or just generically hardened, four times it is said, 'as the Lord had said.' Because you remember the Lord had told Moses ahead of time that Moses would harden his heart. So Moses is confirming in Exodus 7:13, in Exodus 7:22, in Exodus 8:15 and in Exodus 8:19 that just what the Lord had

said happened.

### **III. God makes a distinction between His people by His special providence.**

Now we must hasten on very quickly. We look at the fourth plague and two things. In verse 20 through 24 we see Moses teach us about the special providence of God. The command and implementation of the fourth plague is recounted there, and then God's display of His special providence over His people is introduced. And we learn something in this passage. For the first time in the plague stories, there is a distinction made between God and His people. This plague will be visited upon Egypt but not upon Goshen. It will be visited by Pharaoh and even his own court, by not upon the people of Israel. God does not always spare His children the affects of judgment. But He does always look over them with His special providence. And so sparing them of the plagues in this place, He not only emphasizes His sovereignty but He does always look over them with His special providence. And so by sparing them of the plagues in this place, He not only emphasizes His sovereignty, He has the power to spare His own people. Pharaoh doesn't. This is almost a challenge. Now Pharaoh I am going to visit this plague tomorrow. I'm the God of My people, I'm going to spare them the plague. What do you plan to do. There's no rejoinder there. Pharaoh doesn't have the power to spare his people about from what is about to happen.

Moses is told to rise up early and meet Pharaoh at the water. Rising up early would have been normal for Nomads, they were used to doing that, getting early starts before the heat of the day. But he's told to meet at the water. Now that's very interesting. As far as we know Pharaoh's didn't bathe in the Nile. The only reason Pharaoh would have been down at the water would have been to engage in worship. Now the Lord had just made a mockery of the goddess of the Nile, is Pharaoh back there worshiping her again? Right in the wake of her complete defeat by the Lord of by Israel. You see how hard this man's heart is. Moses is to meet him there. And he's to meet him with a 'thus sayeth the Lord.' And what's the message? Let My people go, that they may serve Me. Once again Israel must be freed to worship. But we're going to see, look at verse 28, that it's going to be God who lets His people go, not Pharaoh. For not only in this plague does God set a distinguishing mark, does He separate His people from Egypt. But He makes it clear that He will let his people go.

Look at what Pharaoh said in verse 28. Pharaoh's backed into a corner. Once again he's gotten himself in a predicament that he cannot extract himself from. He is in the weak position, and yet he talks like he's in charge. He says to Moses, again if you're looking at your Hebrew text you will notice that the I is emphasized. I, he says, will let you go. And once again, Pharaoh's words will come back to haunt him. But God says no Pharaoh, it won't be you letting my people go. It will be Me letting My people go. I'm sovereign here, Pharaoh, and you will let them go when I am ready for you to do it. I am sovereign here, and

you're going to learn that lesson, Pharaoh. The negotiations between Moses and Pharaoh and the termination of this plague, and Pharaoh's second lie, simply emphasize the hardness of his heart and emphasized if the children of Israel are to be freed, it's going to God that does it. He saves His people. He delivers His people.

And those lessons are so important for us to learn today, because we are so tempted to run other places in difficult times other than to the Lord. But He is the only one who can set us free. He is the one who has special providence over every circumstances, and He is the only one who can set us free. Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God, we bow before You, and we praise You. We ask that You would bless the study of Your Word to Your Own glory, and to our eternal good. In Jesus name, Amen.

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