

Bible Study # 14 Exodus 8.16–32 02–23–21

The fourth sign in the series was an infestation of gnats or lice. Two things were different about this sign. First, no pre-warning was given to Pharaoh, and secondly, his magicians were unable to reproduce this miracle. They went further than merely acknowledging their inability to do similarly, by attributing the sign to ‘the finger of God’.

Whereas the previous sign related to water, this one was concerned with insects in the dust. Moses carried out God’s instructions, and, in turn, Aaron stretched out his hand with the staff. When the staff hit the dust of the earth, lice came on humans and animals alike.

The Hebrew word for ‘lice’ is rare, but some small insect, with dust as its habitat, is clearly in view. The last sentence of verse 17 emphasizes how widespread the infestation was – ‘all the dust throughout the land of Egypt’.

The magicians made the attempt to do the same as Moses and Aaron had done, but failed: lit. ‘And the magicians by their secret arts tried to bring forth the gnats, and they were not able’. This marked a new phase in the series of events.

The magicians made the admission; ‘This is the finger of God’. It is hard to be sure how much this meant. Was it a real admission that the God of the Israelites was indeed the source of the miracles? The context suggests that it was (see also 9:11).

The outcome was exactly as was the case with the previous signs. Rather than Pharaoh being brought to repentance, he hardened his heart still further. This refusal to listen and obey was just as the Lord had earlier declared.

God gives Pharaoh an opportunity again to repent, believe and obey God’s direction. Even when his court magicians declared, ‘This is the finger of God’, he would not. No better commentary on this can be written than Romans 1:18–20:

“18 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. 19 For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. 20 For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.”

The next sign is introduced in the same way as those before. A divine word formed the basis for what transpired. More interaction took place between Moses and Pharaoh than with the previous signs, and a sharp differentiation was made between the Israelites and the Egyptians. The principle stated here (vv. 22-23) came to fuller expression at the time of the Passover and the exodus itself (12:12-13; 14:29-30).

Another rendezvous at the riverbank was planned (cf. 7:15), and the same command of the Lord was transmitted to Pharaoh: ‘Send my people away so that they may worship me’. The threat that followed had play on words in it, involving the verb ‘to send’. If Pharaoh didn’t send the people away, the Lord would send a swarm of flies to cover the ground and to penetrate into all the Egyptian houses.

The word for ‘a swarm of flies’ only occurs here in Exodus 8, and in the two psalms that speak of the signs in Egypt (see Pss. 78:45; 105:31). Exact identification of the insect is impossible, and as the noun (‘ârov) is derived from a verb (‘ârav) meaning ‘to mingle’ or ‘intermix’, the probability is that an assorted infestation of small insects is intended.

The next verses (22, 23) set out a very important principle that operated in relation to the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt. It was a demonstration of God's sovereignty in grace in the redemption of His people through His judgment on the Egyptians. The declaration of God to Moses was: 'I will set apart the land of Goshen in which my people live'.

The verb for 'set apart' should not be confused with the verb 'to redeem'. It means simply 'to set apart', 'to make a distinction'. It occurs three times in the narrative concerning the signs (8:22 [Heb. 8:18]; 9:4; 11:7). The Israelites were exempt from this judgment due solely to God's determination, and in itself the invasion of the insects was to show that the Lord was really God.

The idea was emphasized by its repetition in a slightly different form: 'I will put a deliverance between your people and my people'. The word for 'deliverance' is really 'redemption' and it is rare, occurring only here and in Psalms 111:9 and 130:7. Though emendation has often been suggested, it is best to retain the MT as the word fits the context well.

How God was going to show differentiation between Israel and Egypt would ultimately revolve around redemption. Pharaoh and his people did not have long to wait for this distinction to be made, for intimation was given that it would occur the very next day.

God carried out His word, and a heavy infestation of the insects took place. The narrative then indicates that the land was 'ruined'. The usage of this verb shows that it often connotes a devastation caused by God's judgment. Thus it appears in relation to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 13:10; 19:13, 29), while later it occurs in relation to both Babylon (Jer. 51:11) and Tyre (Ezek. 26:4).

The effect of the sign was that Pharaoh relented to the extent that he would let the Israelites sacrifice in Egypt, not in the desert, as was their request. He does go some way, however, to acknowledging their God – 'Sacrifice to your God.' Nothing but the release of the Israelites from their slavery would suffice.

In reply, Moses indicated that the offering of sacrifices by his people could lead to an outbreak of violence against them. His reference to stoning is not to mean execution, for Egypt did not practice stoning, but to communal violence instigated by an intense dislike of their sacrificial customs. This is the meaning of 'detestable in their eyes', not that it was detestable in God's sight. Moses insisted that God demanded a three-day journey into the desert rather than sacrifices in the locations where they lived.

A short trip into the desert for sacrificial activities was acceptable to Pharaoh, and he even names the Israelites' God as 'the Lord your God'. He spoke imperiously to Moses and Aaron, shown both by the form of his statement, 'I am sending you', and also by the instruction that continued the prohibition that they were not to go far. Corrupt leaders are more interested in you obeying them than God.

The more unusual negative prohibition form is replaced by the form denoting either a strong prohibition, or one of more permanent nature. This is the form that divine commands normally take in the Old Testament. Here Pharaoh is depicted almost as exercising divine control. Finally, he requested prayer on his behalf, so that the current sign would be removed.

Moses promised an immediate response to Pharaoh's request, with the assurance that by the next day the flies would disappear. Appended to this was a warning. Pharaoh had already acted deceitfully, and Moses was trying to ensure this did not happen again. Action, not changing the mind, was demanded.

The promise to Pharaoh was kept, and Moses' prayer was answered. All the people, from Pharaoh downward, were relieved of this plague. Not one fly remained. However, Pharaoh's heart was not touched; instead he hardened it still further.

We will continue our study with Exodus 9:1–12.