

Special Note: I am sorry for being a day late with this. I was working with my wife to get our tax information together so she can deliver it to our tax preparer and it took more time than I expected due to a complication with the books I purchased for Bible Study and ministry this past year. I should get back on track this weekend.

Bible Study # 15 Exodus 9.1–12 02–24–21

Another sign was directed against the livestock in Egypt – cattle, horses, donkeys, herds [of cattle] and flocks [of sheep and/or goats]. These were the animals that provided the population with many things needed for day-to-day living, including milk, meat, clothing, and transportation. Bulls in particular were worshipped as part of a fertility cult, while female gods were depicted as cows.

Once again, one of the ‘signs’ has a sharp polemical edge to it. It was directed against animals necessary for life, but also against the false gods of Egypt. This ‘sign’ also differs from the earlier ones in that there is greater emphasis on specification of time, on the distinction made between the Israelites and the Egyptians, and on death of the animals.

It is made plain that Moses was not the originator of the messages being relayed to Pharaoh. It is the Lord who sent him to Pharaoh and who gave him the words to speak. The message did not change, for it was identical with previous ones (see 7:16; 8:1; 8:20). It remained: ‘Let my people go, so that they may worship me’.

The Lord’s word to Moses assumed the situation that Pharaoh would continue to hang on to the Israelites. The Hebrew text speaks of his still seizing them. The warning to Pharaoh was clear. Refusal to allow the Israelites to go would result in the hand of the Lord being expressed against them in the form of ‘a very heavy pestilence’.

Any kind of pestilence that produced death could happen. It could be by sword, or famine, or, as here, by fatal illness. All the domesticated animals were to be affected (‘all the livestock in the field’). The principle of making a distinction between the Egyptians and the Israelites was to be carried out in a very telling way, for the animals belonging to the Israelites were to be exempted from the infliction of the judgment.

The Lord even set the time when the pestilence would occur. It happened in accordance with his warning to Pharaoh. The difference, divinely determined between the two groups in Egypt, was manifest in the death of the Egyptians’ livestock, whereas not one died belonging to the Israelites. Redemptive judgment was on display again.

Pharaoh needed to satisfy himself that the warning had become a reality. His investigation confirmed the fact that the disease had affected not one of the Israelites’ animals. Despite another miracle, he hardened his heart again, and did not release them.

The next sign from the Lord affected not only the animals but also the Egyptians themselves. The instruction was for a fistful of dust from the furnace to be tossed into the air before Pharaoh. The word for ‘dust’ only occurs in this passage in the Old Testament, while the word for ‘furnace’ only appears in two other passages in the Old Testament (Gen. 19:28; Exod. 19:18).

Linguistically we can’t connect the verb and noun here. It is possible the reference to ‘furnace’ may be to the ovens that the Israelites used to fire the bricks that they were compelled to make. From the instrument of slavery came a sign of God’s judgment.

The command to Moses was to ‘scatter’ the soot. This word is normally used of ritual occasions such as sprinkling blood on the people and the altar (Exod. 24:6-8; 29:20; Lev. 1:5). Here it is used of the dramatized judgment that was to be inflicted because of the Egyptians’ refusal to let the Israelites go.

When tossed in the air, the soot was to change to fine dust that would cause ‘festering boils’ on both the Egyptians and their animals. The word for ‘festering boils’ only appears in verses 9-10, and seems to refer to some skin disease, whether a form of leprosy or skin anthrax. This affliction may be the background for the reference in Deuteronomy 28:27, in which Israel was warned by Moses that one of the covenantal curses would be affliction ‘with the boils of Egypt and with tumors, festering sores and itch’.

In that case, the message was that the exodus and its accompanying events would be reversed, and Israel would suffer many of the diseases that had been inflicted on the Egyptians.

Both Moses and Aaron took soot as directed and appeared before Pharaoh. Open and public demonstration of God’s power were part of his revelations by signs and wonders. Moses threw the soot into the air (lit. ‘heavenwards’), and men and animals were affected with the threatened festering sores. It is hard to imagine that none of soot fell on Aaron and Moses, but they had not boils.

The Egyptian magicians, who have not been mentioned since the incident with the gnats (8:19), were themselves included in the judgment, and could not even maintain their position in Moses’ presence. Occult practices could not sustain them in the face of divine power.

We need to note a shift in the language here. In the previous discussion of Pharaoh’s refusal to listen to the signs and wonders, it said either ‘his heart was hardened’ or ‘Pharaoh hardened his heart’. Now it says, ‘the LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh. In God’s righteous rule he worked on Pharaoh and further strengthened his rebelliousness. Pharaoh’s own antagonism was now being confirmed by God’s action (cf. Rom. 9:18).

This is why examination of our own sinful heart and mind must be examined regularly. Do not take confession of sin for granted or resist it. Failure to repent can lead to hardness of heart. Do not despair if you recognize that you have had episodes of ‘hardness of heart’. God though his Spirit can change ‘a heart of stone’ into ‘a heart of flesh’ (cf. Ezekiel 11:19, 36:26; 2 Corinthians 3:3).

Our next section to study will be Exodus 9:13–35.