

EXODUS

THE GOD WHO RESCUES

SESSION OBJECTIVE: EXODUS 8:16-19

To understand more about the third plague, the gnats.

Read the Text:

“Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘Say to Aaron, ‘Stretch out your staff and strike the dust of the earth, so that it may become gnats in all the land of Egypt.’” 17 And they did so. 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 in all the land of Egypt. 18 The magicians tried by their secret arts to produce gnats, but they could not. So there were gnats on man and beast. 19 Then the magicians said to Pharaoh, “This is the finger of God.” But Pharaoh’s heart was hardened, and he would not listen to them, as the LORD had said.” (Exodus 8:16-19, ESV)

Study the Text:

Plague #3: Gnats

Following the respite of the second plague, Pharaoh hardened his heart again towards the Hebrew people and remained unrelenting to let them go (Ex. 8:15). This incited the LORD to bring the third plague of gnats to the land. While small and relatively nondescript in comparison to some of the other plagues with more details, there are some rich aspects of this passage that should not be overlooked. Below is a breakdown of some important key concepts and terms.

GNATS

This plague would have been certainly more intense than the first two. When Aaron struck the earth with his staff, “all the dust of the earth became gnats in the land of Egypt” (Ex. 8:17). For those unfamiliar with this region, there is a lot of dust there. A lot of dust means a lot of gnats. Gnat as a modern term is often used as a catch all for any small, two-winged biting insect. Mosquitoes are commonly referred to as gnats as well, and indeed belong to the same family order (Diptera). The main difference between the common gnat and a mosquito is that common gnats bite while mosquitoes suck blood. Without further detail in Exodus 8, it’s unclear what kind of gnat is in mind. Some have argued that these were small flies or mosquitoes.¹ Some have even argued that it was lice.² Truthfully, it’s irrelevant what kind of insect appears. To have an infestation of this size and magnitude of any small, flying insect that bites would have been awful.

This plague is similar to other plagues in several ways. It’s similar to the plague of frogs in that both involve the supernatural mass production of an animal with highly inconvenient effects. It is similar to the first plague in that both involve Aaron’s staff, although first plague involves Aaron’s staff touching the water whereas this third plague involves the staff touching the ground. Perhaps this is an implied way of demonstrating the LORD’s sovereign power over both the water and land?

¹ Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus*, vol. 2 of The New American Commentary, eds. E. Ray Clendenen and Kenneth A. Mathews (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2006), 211.

² T. Desmond Alexander, *Exodus*, Apollos Old Testament Commentary (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 179.

FAILED SECRET ARTS

One notable difference between the third plague and the first and second plagues is the inability of the magicians to replicate the plague. It is on this point that our previous remarks about the magicians of Egypt become even more important. If we understand the court magicians as simply playing a game of smoke and mirrors and fooling people into thinking they were able to replicate the miracles despite the fact that they couldn't, then this instance is easy to work through logically. While they could have manipulated the color of the water and used trained snakes and frogs in their sleight of hand ruse, they certainly would not have been able to do the same with something as small as a gnat, and certainly not to the magnitude that Moses and Aaron had achieved through the power of God. They would have been stumped!

However, if our remarks are true and they were practicing some kind of sorcery that afforded them the supernatural ability to match wits with Moses and Aaron in the first two plagues, that they were unable to match the third plague speaks to the increasing intensity and terror of these plagues. This would have created quite the stir. People in the kingdom, and especially the royal family, would have known that these were men capable of unnatural acts. For them to be bested would have only amplified the power of Moses and Aaron and their God. If everything the court magicians were doing was a ruse, of course they would eventually get bested. But if they were able to perform actual, powerful magic and yet they still get bested? This would have been a truly terrifying reality for the people of Egypt.

The court magicians have no ability to explain what Moses and Aaron have done other than to attribute their power to "the finger of God" (Ex. 8:19). This terminology is found again in Exodus in a story about the Ten Commandments, and later in a retelling of the same story in Deuteronomy: "And he gave to Moses, when he had finished speaking with him on Mount Sinai, the two tablets of the testimony, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God" (Ex. 31:8; see *also* Deut. 9:10). This is not a reflection of faith or belief on the part of the magicians, but merely the recognition that what they were doing was purely divine in nature.

MAN AND BEAST

One final aspect of this plague that was a little different than the previous two plagues is that unlike the first two that only affect the people of the kingdom of Egypt, this one would plague both "man and beast" (Ex. 8:18). This demonstrates the increased intensity of the plagues. The first one affected the people of the kingdom, but likely not Pharaoh. The second one affected all of the people including Pharaoh. The third now affects the people and the livestock.

A Gospel Connection

The terminology of "the finger of God" later becomes an important term in Luke's Gospel as well. In Luke chapter 11, Jesus is accused by people of casting out demons by the power of "Beelzebul, the prince of demons" (Lk. 11:15). Jesus responds by talking about how irrational and illogical this accusation is. It makes no sense for Satan to cast out demons, for it would mean his kingdom is divided, and "a kingdom divided against itself is laid waste" (Lk. 11:17). "But," Jesus continues, "If it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Lk. 11:20). In other words, Jesus is connecting His divine power and authority to the same divine power and authority behind the plagues in Egypt. Jesus is God, and this is a subtle and yet clear way of expressing His claim to deity.

What About Now?

One takeaway is the fact that the power of God cannot ultimately be replicated. The magicians, whether they were full of limited power or were simply good at fooling people, could not replicate a plague to this degree. God's power may be mocked and in some cases mimicked, but it can never be fully replicated or undone. Another takeaway is the sovereignty of God over land and sea. Aaron's staff has now touched the Nile and turned it to blood as well as the ground and turned the dust to gnats. God's power is not limited to one aspect of creation; He is Lord over all.

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Exodus 8:16. What did the LORD tell Aaron to do? What would be the result?

2. Read Exodus 8:17. To whom does the "they" refer? What was the result of Aaron's obedience?

Day Two

1. Read Exodus 8:18. Were the magicians able to replicate this plague? What does that say about their power?

2. Read Exodus 8:18. What did this plague affect that the previous two plagues did not affect?

Day Three

3. Read Exodus 8:19. To what did the magicians attribute this miracle?

4. Read Exodus 31:8 and Deuteronomy 9:10. How is the "finger of God" to be understood in this passage? How does this connect to Exodus 8:19?

Day Four

1. Read Luke 18:10. How is the "finger of God" to be understood in this passage? How does it connect to Exodus 8:19?

2. Read Exodus 8:19. Did the plague move Pharaoh to relent and let the people go?
-
-

Discuss the Text!

Week 17 Discussion: None Like God's Power

The first two plagues were replicated by the magicians of Egypt, but the third one was not; they believed it was truly a result of the "finger of God." Talk as a group about the incomparable power of God that has changed your life, and how there is nothing else like it.

1. Icebreaker: Have you been changed by Jesus Christ? How do you know?
2. What is something you attributed to the finger of God in your life that could never be replicated?
3. What are some examples of "counterfeit" miracles in the world today?
4. Have you, or someone you know, ever experienced a miracle?
5. Is salvation an example of God's incomparable power? Why or why not?
6. What do you practically "trust" over God's provision in your life? What do you need to do to return your trust to Him?

Takeaways:

1. The third plague involves the dust of the earth in Egypt turning to gnats.
2. The court magicians are unable to replicate this plague and attribute it to the finger of God.
3. Pharaoh's heart remains hardened against the LORD and His people.