

Distinct Plagues
February 8, 2026
Exodus 8:20–9:12

Two weeks ago, the high was 23 degrees and our parking lot was buried in multiple inches of a snow/sleet mix. On that *same* day, Hattiesburg Mississippi hit 70 degrees. Now, that's not completely unexpected, because Hattiesburg is 300 miles south of us. Of course their weather is drastically different than ours. But what *is* noteworthy is how close they were to getting hit too. One could've started their car in Hattiesburg that Sunday and driven—not north—but a little over an hour *west* to Brookhaven, MS. And in that time, they'd be transported from 70 degrees to the 20s, and from *no* ice to a good bit of it.

The weather graphics that weekend showed a dividing line that was fairly pronounced, distinguishing one place from another—telling us *where* the damage would be done, and where it would not. In *this* town, trees would soon block roads. In this *other* one, often not far away, the roads would be absolutely clear.

Today we begin the second triad of wonders, plagues four through six. And in *this* set of three, Moses makes explicit something that's only been implied thus far. And what he emphasizes is distinction. The plagues that would fall squarely upon the Egyptians—with severe consequences—would *not* fall everywhere. We'll consider three distinctions in the text.

1. **A Distinction Between Egypt and Israel (8:20–32)**

We find ourselves in a familiar scene in verse 20: **Now the LORD said to Moses, “Rise early in the morning and present yourself before Pharaoh, as he comes out to the water.”** If you recall, this is almost exactly how *last* week's text began as well (7:15). Right before the river turned into blood, Moses met Pharaoh early in the morning on the bank of the Nile. Since then, that river had turned red, frogs swarmed the land, and the dust of that earth transformed into gnats. In today's passage—at the same time, and the same place—the two men meet again. It could not have been lost on Pharaoh that he was in the very spot where all this began.¹

And it's not *only* the same time and place, in that familiar setting Moses delivers almost the exact same message. It was a message he was given. As Pharaoh came out of the water, he was to say, **“Thus says the LORD, “Let My people go, that they may serve me.”**

The God that brooks no rival, the One no one else is like, speaks. The One that spoke from the bush ablaze but not consumed—Yahweh—speaks through His prophet. He calls the Hebrews His people. He demands that they might be set free. And He aims for their deliverance so that they might serve, or worship, Him. In that single sentence, there is much to consider. He's a God that, in mercy, speaks. He's a God that aims to deliver. He's a God that delivers with purpose.

Further, He's a God that warns. Verse 21: **For if you do not let My people go, behold I will send swarms of flies on you and on your servants and on your people and into your houses; and the houses of the Egyptians will be full of swarms of flies, and also the ground on which they dwell.** Not unlike some of the points Chris made last week, there's a little ambiguity concerning precisely which kind of flying insect this is. One man said a good translation, though quite cumbersome, would be, “Various kinds of annoying biting and nonbiting insects in huge swarms.”²

¹ Doug Stuart, *Exodus*, NAC, 214.

² Stuart, 214.

This “swarming” language harkens back to Genesis 1, as well as Exodus 1, as well as last week’s text. Moses *keeps* using a word representing a number we could *not* count quickly. And the language of verse 21 speaks to this infestation being concentrated on the Egyptians’ homefront. For example, note the prepositional phrases, “on you,” “on your servants,” “on your people,” “into your houses,” and the clause, “the houses of the Egyptians will be full of swarms of flies.”

I wrote that previous paragraph on Thursday, and then I sat there for a minute thinking about these flies—trying to imagine what they were like, their size, and what it would be like to have swarms of them in everyone’s home—and *while* I was meditating on that, someone knocked on my office door. I said, “Come in.” It’s always a bit of a surprise. Who’s it going to be? And when the door opened there stood the Terminix guy. When I saw him, I laughed—which was probably odd. So, I quickly said, “You know, I was *just* thinking about insects.” And then we talked about this passage.

I assume many of us—at one point or another—have seen infestations occur. Maybe you have a story. I don’t want any of us to squirm this morning. Instead, we might just read what verse 24 calls the effect of the flies: **and the land was laid waste.**

Chris mentioned this last week, but there’s a sense in which the plagues function like something of a de-creation. That is, God’s creative power from Genesis 1 is on display, but rather than that power being tapped for the good of the created order, His acts, little by little, bring about a steady destruction of Egypt itself.³ The Nile’s corruption, the stench of the frogs, and the dust of the ground was stirred up in *last* week’s text. And this week Moses makes clear that the land was being laid waste.

We’ll come *back* to that, but not before noticing what Moses emphasizes *after* he warns Pharaoh. And, again, this is vital to grasp for this middle triad of plagues. Verse 22: **But on that day I will set apart the land of Goshen, where My people are living, so that no swarms of flies will be there.**

Now, again, this distinction between Egypt and Israel is implied elsewhere.⁴ But here Moses makes sure to record what God planned to do. He intends to set apart His people. I don’t want to get too far ahead, but I also don’t want us to miss what this “distinguishing between” pictures. The swarms of flies—the destruction—will fall on God’s enemies. But “where Yahweh’s people are” will be set apart—protected. And if we zoom out, and think about what’s ahead, we know that what’s pictured here develops, so that in Exodus 19 the Hebrews are called a holy people—a people set apart (Ex. 19:6). And that’s a shadow-y theme that continues throughout the Old Testament, finding its substance in the New. So that in John 17 Jesus might say, **I was keeping them in Your name which You have given Me; and I guarded them and not one of them perished** (Jn. 17:12).

In these three plagues, we’re to notice that—even in judgment—God sets apart His people, keeping and guarding them. And He does so, in part, so that their protection might be a witness to the world of His power. Verse 22 continues to make that clear, in words that were to be spoken to Pharaoh: **no swarms of flies will be there, in order that you may know that I, the LORD, am in the midst of the land.**

The LORD speaks plainly to His enemy in verse 23: **I will put a division between My people and your people. Tomorrow this sign will occur.** And it did. Verse 24: **Then the LORD did so. And there came great swarms of flies into the house of Pharaoh and the houses of his servants and the land was laid waste because of the swarms of flies in all the land of Egypt.**

Egypt infested. Goshen clear.

³ Michael Morales, *Exodus Old and New*, 44.

⁴ Stuart, 212.

How would Pharaoh respond? Verse 25 *seems* to indicate a crack developing in the hardened heart of Egypt's pseudo-king: **Pharaoh called for Moses and Aaron and said, "Go, sacrifice to your God within the land."** However, we shouldn't miss what's *actually* happening. Pharaoh is attempting to negotiate, saying, "Sure, you can do your sacrifice, but you can't leave."

Of course, that's *not* what Yahweh asked for—or, better said, *demand*ed. He told Pharaoh, **Let My people go**. This wasn't a story Pharaoh had creative license to write. He didn't give Pharaoh multiple choice. The demands were clear and inflexible.

Further, it might be helpful to recall what Moses knew of Yahweh's promise. Way back in chapter 3, at the bush ablaze, Yahweh made plain: **I have come down to deliver them from the power of the Egyptians, and to bring them up from that land to a good and spacious land, to a land flowing with milk and honey** (Ex. 3:8).

With that in mind, Moses isn't negotiating. Pharaoh said, "Fine. Do your thing. But stay within Egypt's borders." In verse 26, Moses responds: **It is not right to do so, for we will sacrifice to the LORD our God what is an abomination to the Egyptians. If we sacrifice what is an abomination to the Egyptians before their eyes, will they not then stone us?**

Not only is Moses *not* negotiating, he's *also* pointing out the absolute folly of Pharaoh's plan. Verse 27 goes on: **We must go a three days' journey into the wilderness and sacrifice to the LORD our God as He commands us**. And if I might summarize, Pharaoh concedes—somewhat—in verse 28. This time he says they *can* cross the border of Egypt. However, he's *still* holding on to his perceived authority. So, he tells them not to go *too* far.

Interestingly, he also asks Moses to intercede for him. Does this mean he's opening up to the message Moses brought, or to the God Moses proclaimed? Almost certainly not. Note in verse 29 *what* Moses prays for: **Behold, I am going out from you, and I shall make supplication to the LORD that the swarms of flies may depart from Pharaoh, from his servants, and from his people tomorrow**. So, while Pharaoh did ask Moses to intercede, based on verse 29, it's *most* likely that Pharaoh asked Moses to pray that he might have some relief.

But either way, Moses isn't duped, by his request for prayer, nor by his momentary concession. Moses has not forgotten fickle Pharaoh. Because not too long before this, as quickly as the frogs disappeared, so did Pharaoh's assurances. So, in verse 29 Moses says: **only do not let Pharaoh deal deceitfully again in not letting the people go to sacrifice to the LORD**.

After that, Moses leaves Pharaoh. He prays for relief. Verse 31: **The LORD did as Moses asked, and removed the swarms of flies from Pharaoh, from his servants and from his people; not one remained**. Yet again, the Lord showed not only His power, but His patience with His enemies.

And yet again, His enemies showed how stiff their neck was. Verse 32: **But Pharaoh hardened his heart this time also, and he did not let the people go**. That's the fourth plague, or the fourth sign. And in it we see a distinction made between Egypt and Israel.

2. A Distinction Between Death and Life (9:1–7)

Chapter 9 begins: **Then the LORD said to Moses, "Go to Pharaoh and speak to him, 'Thus says the LORD, the God of the Hebrews, "Let My people go, that they may serve Me."'"** Other than identifying Himself with a few more words,⁵ this is the same demand made before the fourth plague. But verse 2 does introduce a nuance not found thus far. Moses continues, . . . **for if you refuse to let them go and continue to hold them**. I point that last clause out because the

⁵ Words He used to introduce the first plague—the God of the Hebrews.

implied idea is that God's people actually *belonged* somewhere else. Pharaoh was keeping them from a place they belonged.⁶ Or to use the language here, he continued **to hold them**.

And not unlike the last time Moses spoke to Pharaoh, *after* he delivered the demand, he delivers a warning concerning what would happen should the demand *not* be met. Verse 3: **Behold, the hand of the LORD will come with a very severe pestilence**. None of the prior plagues were announced in this way, that is, as something **the hand of the LORD** would bring about.⁷ Further, this is also the *first* time the word pestilence—often translated “plague”—is used in this section of Scripture.⁸ The **hand of the LORD** would bring about this **very severe pestilence**. And this plague, verse 3 says, would be **on your livestock which are in the field, on the horses, on the donkeys, on the camels, on the herds, and on the flocks**.

I've probably told this story before, but I'll never forget when I was dating Julie and we went with her family shopping for an Easter dress. Back then this meant actually getting in the car and parking and walking from store to store in our local metropolis—Cookeville. That night Julie's mom was looking for a dress. Her sister was looking for one. Julie was looking for one. And Julie's dad and I tagged along. And as you might recall, her father Max comes from a long-line of dairy farmers. And what I remember about that night is that we talked about cows for hours. *His* cows, in particular. That is, not generally, nor abstractly, nor with vagueness—but with specifics, certain cows with particular numbers assigned them. Max was good at his job. He knew nearly everything about them. Because those cattle were his livelihood.

I bring that up because, generally, more urban or suburban folks don't think about livestock quite like that. Agrarian cultures do, however. And in Biblical times, there was no other kind of culture. To be clear, in that world this list of livestock—horses, donkeys, camels, herds of cattle, and flocks of sheep—would've provided food, milk, clothing, and often transportation.⁹ These animals would've been seen as interrelated to the welfare of humanity.¹⁰ Not tangentially connected, as something of a boost to my happiness, but as essential to my existence. And on *all* that, the hand of the Lord would come with a **very severe pestilence**.

But, again, not on *all* the livestock. The distinction is here as well. Verse 4: **But the LORD will make a distinction between the livestock of Israel and the livestock of Egypt, so that nothing will die of all that belongs to the sons of Israel**.

As bad as the plagues have been thus far, this is actually the *first* time anything has been mentioned about death. And it's worth noticing how these plagues develop. Because it's certainly not the *last* time. But here, *before* that final plague, the Lord too makes a distinction between His people and His enemies. What Egypt would experience—death—His people would not. Verses 5 and 6 detail that: **The LORD set a definite time, saying, “Tomorrow the LORD will do this thing in the land.” So the LORD did this thing on the next day, and all the livestock of Egypt died; but of the livestock of the sons of Israel, not one died**. Not one.

As you might assume, with the prior plagues it was probably *harder* to observe much of this distinction. Did they have frogs in their ovens, too? Maybe, maybe not. Did the gnats or flies affect the Israelites as badly as they'd affected the Egyptians? And further, once this or that plague disappeared, maybe it would've been easier to describe what happened as merely some natural phenomenon. And surely stubborn Pharaoh could convince himself of all kinds of things.

⁶ Stuart, 221.

⁷ Stuart, 221.

⁸ Desmond Alexander, *Exodus*, AOTC, 185.

⁹ John Currid, *Ancient Egypt and the Old Testament*, 111.

¹⁰ Stuart, 222.

However, *this* plague was different. The Egyptian horses, cattle, donkeys, camels, and sheep would've *all* fallen over dead. The effect would've been obvious, and lasting. And so would the clarity of the distinction be. I imagine this king of Egypt just *had* to see whether it had actually come about as Moses said. Did some live, and some die? Verse 7: **Pharaoh sent, and behold, there was not even one of the livestock of Israel dead.** In Goshen, among the Hebrews, sheep, cattle, horses, and camels stood.

Now surely *this* would do it, convincing Pharaoh of a mightier power than his own. Verse 7 continues: **But the heart of Pharaoh was hardened, and he did not let the people go.**

3. A Distinction Between Egypt's gods and the Hebrews' God (9:8–12)

When we previewed these plagues, we noted the importance of identifying the primary combatants in these chapters. We can't say *too* many times that the conflict here is *not* primarily between Moses and Pharaoh, nor between Moses and the Egyptian magicians, nor between Israel and Egypt. It is, instead, between the deities of Egypt and the God of the Hebrews.¹¹

When we get to Exodus 12:12 the Lord's purposes will be made plain, when He says: **against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments.** But we don't have to wait until chapter 12 to conclude that's what's happening here in each and every plague.

Because like last week with the Egyptian's worship of the Nile, or of their pseudo-god Heqet, we should point out that livestock—in particular cattle—would've been embodiments of Egyptian gods. Cults centered on bulls, for example, would've flourished in that place and time.¹² They had, truly, without any humor, “sacred cows.”¹³

And this rampant and destructive idolatry is clearly seen in the third and final plague we consider today. Verse 8: **Then the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, “Take for yourselves handfuls of soot from a kiln, and let Moses throw it toward the sky in the sight of Pharaoh. It will become fine dust over all the land of Egypt, and will become boils breaking out with sores on man and beast through all the land of Egypt.”**

Concerning development, death hadn't been mentioned until the 5th plague. And, then in evidence of more development, the actual human body—the flesh—of Egyptian men and women weren't afflicted until this one.

Yet, verse 10: **So they took soot from a kiln, and stood before Pharaoh; and Moses threw it toward the sky, and it became boils breaking out with sores on man and beast. The magicians could not stand before Moses because of the boils, for the boils were on the magicians as well as the Egyptians.**

The magicians were in the final plague of the triad studied last week. And they return in the final plague of *this* triad. Why?

To get at that answer, we might be reminded that in Egypt, religious practices were closely linked to magic.¹⁴ These magicians were some of the primary agents charged with summoning the power of the lower-case Egyptian gods. Further, they would've *often* done this kind of thing to restore health. In short, in Egypt magic, medicine, and the “miraculous” were closely linked.¹⁵

So, why are the magicians brought back up? Because, in this case, the “physicians” couldn't heal themselves. And because of that, the power of Yahweh *over* the gods of Egypt was made

¹¹ Currid, 86; Alec Motyer, *Exodus*, BST, 97.

¹² Currid, 111.

¹³ Phil Ryken, *Exodus*, 264.

¹⁴ Alexander, 160.

¹⁵ Stuart, 229.

obvious.¹⁶ The Egyptian worldview, their idolatrous ethos, and their pseudo-king Pharaoh were being unmasked.

Again, the combatants in this section of Scripture are the deities of Egypt and the God of the Hebrews. And thus far, the distinction between them could not be clearer. Yahweh acts. The magicians can't even stand.

Verse 12: **And the LORD hardened Pharaoh's heart, and he did not listen to them.** As God's power is revealed, so is Pharaoh's heart. And then verse 12 ends with the repeated refrain. That is, Moses tells us that all of this happens **just as the LORD had spoken to Moses.**

Conclusion

I can't remember if I said this publicly, but one of the things I've been telling friends is that the issue with preaching the gospel from Exodus isn't finding *a way* to do it, it's deciding *which* way to do so. In one sense, every week I'm not having to figure out some loose connection, superimposing some New Testament reality on something *not* in the text. Instead, my experience thus far has been choosing *between* multiple things in this or that passage that preview quite clearly what Christ has done. I wouldn't say there are *too* many ways to preach the gospel, but that sentence does get at the dilemma of the preacher, *somewhat*.

In fact, today the points themselves proclaim it. That is, there's a clear distinction—a meticulous one—between God's people and God's enemies. And because of that, there's a distinction—a powerfully flawless one—between death and life. Because there's a distinction between the gods of this world and the God that fashioned this world.

The One that died so that His people might live—a distinct people He set apart, a people He guards and protects, a people He delivers so that they might worship Him alone.

¹⁶ Stuart, 229.