

Text: Exodus 8:20-32

Title: "A swarm that can tell the difference"

Time: 7/19/2020 am

Place: NBBC

Introduction: We have come to the fourth plague God uses to deliver his people from slavery in Egypt. Similar to the third plague we looked at last week, the Hebrew word describing the problem here is used only here in this passage and in two Psalms that comment on this passage. Note that in our KJV Bibles the words *of flies* are italicized. The translators did that to tell us that those words are not in the original Hebrew, but added for the purpose of clarity.

The word *swarm* is singular in the original language, so Bible students believe that the plague is a swarm of insect of some kind. I noticed that the passage is pretty clear that the swarm is especially a problem for the houses and ground of Egypt (vv. 21, 24). For that reason, my guess at the identification of this insect is a bit unconventional. I think it was probably an ant infestation.

The "father of modern taxonomy," Carl Linnaeus [d. 1778], identified one of the ants he studies as the "Pharaoh ant" because he thought that it was involved in one of the plagues of Egypt. I think his assumption has some merit. Listen to what the ant might have done to the adobe brick homes of ancient Egypt: "Ants and microorganisms attacked the storerooms structure to feed on the abundant chopped straw or chaff contained in the mud bricks. This resulted in reducing significantly the tensile strength of the adobe and consequently cracking and possible partial collapses occur in the attacked places. If no collapse occurs, such attack leaves the mud brick full of holes giving a bad appearance" [Abdou A. O. D. El-Derby and Ahmed

Elyamani, "The Adobe Barrel Vaulted Structures in Ancient Egypt: A Study of Two Case Studies for Conservation Purposes," *Mediterranean Archaeology and Archaeometry*, Vol. 16, No 1,(2016), 305].

Whatever it was that comprised this swarm, what is remarkable about it is that it has the ability to tell the difference between Egypt and Israel (v. 22). Sesame Street used to ask its viewers, "Which one of these things is not like the other; which one of these things doesn't belong?" Well, in the fourth plague, the swarm knew the correct answer. I have titled the message, "A swarm that can tell the difference," and I want us also to be able to see the difference God used them to highlight between Israel, God's people, and Egypt. We will note four differences.

I. The God whom God's people worship is different from the gods others worship (vv. 20-21a).

Illustration: The last time we saw Pharaoh go down to the Nile, we noted some insight from a commentator about this practice (Keil and Delitzsch): "Both time and place are of significance here. Pharaoh went out in the morning to the Nile (ver. 15, chap. viii. 20), not merely to take a refreshing walk, or to bathe in the river, or to see how high the water had risen, but without doubt to present his daily worship to the Nile, which was honoured by the Egyptians as their supreme deity" (1.478)

Application: Pharaoh went to the Nile for the morning worship of his god. Moses was to confront him there and tell him of the true God's desire to be worshipped by His people according to His will. Defy that desire, Pharaoh, and the true God will show you again what He can do. The Lord's point is not really that man should be able to worship

whom he wants, but rather that the only legitimate worship is the worship of the true God, the God of Moses and Aaron and Israel, the God of the Bible.

C. H. Macintosh: "As a matter of course, men think it quite right for everyone to have a religion, let it be what it may. Provided we are sincere, and do not interfere with our neighbor's creed, it does not matter what shape our religion may happen to wear. Such are the thoughts of men in reference to what they call religion; but it is very obvious that the glory of the name of Jesus finds no place in all this" (2.107).

Moses and Aaron were at the river that morning to interfere with Pharaoh's creed, which said that the true God was not to be worshipped by God's people. But there is a sad sense in which reflection on this passage should bring conviction to the heart of many a true believer. Pharaoh is devout in his worship of the false god. Like many Islamists of our day, he could be counted on to be in the right place at the right time worshipping as his god dictated.

Why is it that many true believers have so much trouble rising early in the morning, opening their Bibles, bending their knees, and beginning the day - day-after-day - in the worship of their true God? Why does Sunday after Sunday pass with no interest in the journey out of Egypt to worship God corporately for a few moments together as He has commanded for our day?

Even the swarm could tell that the God whom His people worship is different than the gods others worship. Can we see the importance of worshipping the true God, or are we lovers of self, of money, and of pleasure more than lovers and worshippers of God? (2 Tim. 3:1-4).

II. The ground on which God's people stand is different from the ground others stand upon (vv. 21b-23).

Illustration: As we meet this morning, some of us are on the parsonage lawn and others of us are on the asphalt surface of the parking lot in these days of Covid-19 prevention. Some of you on the lawn may have noticed that you have to watch for an ant hill here and there, whereas those of you in the parking lot do not have to do so. The reason for this is that ants like the lawn and do not like the parking lot.

Application: This plague of the swarm involved that kind of distinction, only it was not caused by the preference of the insect for one piece of ground over the other. It was caused by the supernatural power of God. He used the ants to show us an important difference between the ground his people stand on and the ground everyone else does.

Goshen, the land where God's people lived, was going to be good ground protected from the plague. Two things made it so according to our passage - (1) Yahweh was in the midst of the people standing on that ground (v. 22; note that the Hebrew word translated *earth* in the KJV is the same as the word translated *land* in the verse - a reference to the land of Goshen to be distinguished as the land of God's people), and (2) Yahweh had marked out that ground with a redemption (v. 23; where the KJV had *division* [following the LXX], the Hebrew has *redemption*). So God's people would not meet with God's judgment in the fourth plague because they stood on ground that their God had redeemed, and because they stood on ground where their God dwelt.

Psalm 130 is a song about the redeemed ground God's people stand on. Verse 7 uses this same word *redemption*, which we find here in verse 23 (KJV: *division*). The good ground

God's people stand on to escape His judgment is the ground of His mercy and the ground of His forgiveness.

God sent His own Son to bear our iniquities on the cross of Calvary, and as Jesus did that for us He prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Are you on the ground of God's forgiveness this morning? Or have you taken your stand in the land of Egypt, where God's presence is unknown, His work of redemption ignored, and His forgiveness and mercy repudiated as unnecessary? That is the land we all come from. We must leave it to get to the good ground of redemption. Do we stand on God's forgiveness in Christ, or on our own conclusion that we do not really need that forgiveness?

Imagine how this account would be different had Pharaoh humbled himself, repented of his sins, and asked for a place on the good ground of redemption with his sins forgiven.

III. The worship God's people offer their God is different from the worship of others (vv. 24-28).

Illustration: C. H. Macintosh: "Reader, we should deeply ponder this. The effort to induce Israel to worship God in Egypt reveals a far deeper principle than we might, at first sight, imagine. The enemy would rejoice, at any time, by any means, or under any circumstances, to get even the semblance of divine sanction for the world's religion. He has no objections to such religion. He gains his ends as effectually by what is termed 'the religious world' as by any other agency; and hence, when he can succeed in getting a true Christian to accredit the religion of the day, he gains a grand point. As a matter of actual fact, one knows that nothing elicits such intense indignation as the divine principle of separation from this present evil world. You may hold the same opinions, preach the same doctrines, do the same

work; but if you only attempt, in ever so feeble a manner, to act upon the divine commands, 'From such turn away' (2 Tim. iii. 5.), and 'Come out from among them' (2 Cor. vi. 17.), you may reckon assuredly upon the most vigorous opposition. Now how is this to be accounted for? Mainly by the fact that Christians, in separation from this world's hollow religiousness, bear a testimony for Christ which they never can bear while connected with it" (2.108-109).

Application: Moses understood that true worship was abominable in the eyes of the Egyptians. He did not modify true worship to accommodate those eyes. Pharaoh too tried to dictate the terms of worship, but Moses would not compromise. He stood on his request for a journey of three days as the Lord had commanded. How they would worship would be dictated by the Lord, not by man.

C. H. McIntosh: "God's people must be separate, not, by any means, on the ground of their superior personal sanctity, but because they are His people, and in order that they may rightly and intelligently answer His gracious end in taking them into connection with Himself, and attaching His name to them. A people still amid the defilements and abominations of Egypt could not have been a witness for the Holy One; nor can any one now, while mixed up with the defilements of a corrupt worldly religion [cp. today's romantic pantheism], possibly be a bright and steady witness for a crucified and risen Christ."

IV. The grace God extends is different than the hard heart of others (vv. 29-32).

Application: Did you notice that the swarm of insects are dispatched by the Lord prior to any concession of Pharaoh toward God's order that Israel make a three-day journey

into the wilderness? Evidently, God extends his gracious mercy to Pharaoh before Pharaoh repents.

In fact, Pharaoh never does repent in spite of this show of mercy from the Lord. Think of all the many days you and I have experienced God's extended mercy without repenting. Paul asks a question each of us must answer honestly for ourselves, "Or despisest thou the riches of his goodness and forbearance and longsuffering; not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance?" (Rom. 2:4). As we contemplate God's goodness to us this morning, in what way should it lead us to repentance? What would He have you and I repent of this morning? We should seek that answer, simply because we have known His goodness.

Conclusion: Our passage uses the same Hebrew root for two things: the swarm was *hard* or *heavy* (v. 24; KJV *grievous*), but so was Pharaoh's *hard* heart (v. 32). In addition, the swarm was corrupting (v. 24), and we can imagine how it would be if this were a swarm of ants attacking adobe brick homes. But did you know that our sin can be just as corrupting? When our heart hardens to the point that it becomes too heavy to move or too stubborn to change, our hearts become like those that brought on the judgment of God in the days of Noah. That too was a day that experienced a corrupting plague, but the corruption did not come from ants, but from the violent and sinful hardened hearts of humans:

"The earth also was corrupt before God, and the earth was filled with violence. And God looked upon the earth, and, behold, it was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted his way upon the earth. And God said unto Noah, 'The end of all flesh is come before me; for the earth is filled with violence

through them; and, behold, I will destroy them with the earth” (Genesis 6:11-13).

The corrupting swarm could tell the difference between the true God and false gods, between the solid ground of God’s redemption and forgiveness and the sinking sand of unbelief, between true godly worship and false pagan worship, and between the good grace of God and the stubbornly hard heart of man. Pharaoh’s corrupting and hard heart could not see these differences.

How much of them can we see?

“A man came—I think it was actually in Philadelphia—on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, ‘Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.’ That is the distinction—the sermon, and the ‘lightning and the thunder.’ To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters.”

—David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

*Preachers and Preaching*