

April 16th, 2023

The Fourth Plague: Lord of the Flies

Exodus 8:20-32

The LORD without means

Thus far in this battle between Moses and Pharaoh, between God and Satan, three plagues have been unleashed. The Nile turned into blood, the frogs emerged from the underworld, and the dust turned into gnats. The fourth plague marks the second phase of the plagues. Whereas before the plagues largely affected their comfort, these set of plagues 4-6 will affect their persons and property. Whereas the previous 3 plagues affected both Egypt and Israel—since both were guilty of idolatry—in the rest of the plagues God makes a distinction, sparing His people from any further calamity. What's unique about this plague and the next is that Yahweh does it without any human instruments. He doesn't use Moses, or Aaron or the staff. He doesn't use means, it's *just* the LORD.¹ As the WCF 5.3 says “God, in His ordinary providence, makes use of means, yet is free to work without, above, and against them, at his pleasure.” I bring this up because I know that there are some of you have little means. More bills are due, then money that is coming in. But this plague demonstrates that God doesn't need means. He is free to bring deliverance without assistance from anyone or anything. What are you in need of loved ones? Who are you looking to? What are you trusting in? Is the LORD's hand shortened that it cannot save? Let this plague recalibrate your spirits. If God controlled the smallest fly in Egypt, is He not in control of the smallest circumstance in your life? Will not the God who cared for the people in Goshen care for you now?

¹ v.24 “The LORD did so.” v.31 “And the LORD did as Moses asked...”

★ The Divine Pursuer

★ The Divine Distinction

★ The Divine Deliverer

I. The Divine Pursuer

A heart as hard as iron

Please look with me at v.20 “Then the LORD said to Moses, “Rise up early in the morning and *present yourself to Pharaoh* [“Take your stand before Pharaoh”²], as he goes out to the water...” Stop. As we said in the first plague, Pharaoh went down to the Nile not *merely* to bathe but to worship his gods. And this shows you the doctrine of total depravity. Egypt has already suffered through 3 plagues and *yet* Pharaoh’s heart is hard as iron. Like a dog returning to his vomit, so Pharaoh returns to his puny gods. Seeing miracles cannot bring a person to repentance. Remember when the deceased rich man begged Abraham to send Lazarus back from the grave to warn his brothers? Abraham responds “They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.”³⁰ And he said, ‘No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’³¹ He said to him, ‘If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, *neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.*’” (Luke 16:29-31). Pharaoh did not repent *though* he saw inconceivable miracles. Only the Holy Spirit can free a person from the slavery of sin. John 6:63 “It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all.”

² John D. Currid, *Exodus Vol. 1: Chapters 1-18*, (Auburn, MA.: Evangelical Press, 2000), pg. 184

“That they may serve me”

Yahweh instructs Moses what to say, halfway through v.20 “...say to him, ‘Thus says the Lord, “Let my people go, *that they may serve me.*”’” This is the fifth time this formula has been spoken in some form or another.³ *Let my people go, so that they can come to me.* The *reason* God gives for their liberation is the dominate idea: *so that they may serve Me, be with Me, glorify Me, dwell with Me.* We’ll come back to that.

The threat

Here’s what Yahweh threatens Pharaoh with if he doesn’t obey. v.21 “Or else, if you will not let my people go, behold, I will send swarms of flies on you and your servants and your people, and into your houses. And the houses of the Egyptians shall be filled with swarms of flies, and also the ground on which they stand.” These were insects that could both fly and walk along the ground. These insects could destroy property, since the end of v.24 says that *they ruined the land.* I suspect these might have been beetles. The Egyptians beetle, one commentator says is “...very destructive...inflicting severe bites on animals, others destroying clothes, books, plants, every thing.”⁴ The Hebrew is ambiguous, it simply says “swarms.” It could be that there was many different types of insects in these swarms.

Khepra or Beelzebub

Recall all these plagues were judgments against Egyptian gods. Each plague was Yahweh defeating Egypt’s ‘deities.’ If these were beetles (dung

³ Exodus 3:12, 18; Exodus 5:1; Exodus 7:16

⁴ Source: Jamieson-Fausset-Brown Bible Commentary at <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/exodus/8-23.htm>

beetles no less) it was against the god Khepra who had a human body with the head of a scarab beetle.⁵ He was the Egyptian god of resurrection. Or perhaps, if these insects were flies, it was against the god Beelzebub which means “the lord of the flies.” One author notes that “his role was to protect [Egypt’s] land from swarms of flies and other natural disasters.”⁶ And yet neither of these gods could protect Egypt.

The bug plague

How awful would this plague have been? Big bugs, small bugs, crawling bugs, stinging bugs, filthy bugs, bugs carrying disease. Children, boys and girls one time when I was your age I was lying on my couch and a big spider crawled right across my lap, and I freaked out. Can you imagine your lap being covering with bugs? v.24 says there were “great” swarms, the Hebrew word means “heavy.” The very air was *heavy* with bugs. And they swarmed in their homes, on their walls, dropping from their ceiling into their hair. They were between their clothing, under their feet, in their sandals. They would have had to shut their eyes so they wouldn’t go blind by their stings. They would have been gasping for air, covering their mouths with clothing so they wouldn’t have inhaled them. They would have been in an absolute panic. The empire of Egypt was being overturned, ruined, house by house, street by street, city by city.

1st principle: God will overturn empires to have His people

That brings us to our **first principle**: *God will do whatever it takes (including overturning empires) to bring us to Himself.* Ever since the fall of man, God’s aim in

⁵ Source: <https://kids.britannica.com/students/article/Khepri/311986>

⁶ Philip Graham Ryken, *Preaching the Word: Exodus, Saved for God’s Glory*, (Wheaton, IL.: Crossway, 2015), pg. 223

all of history is to bring His people back to Himself. All redemptive history is the narrative of God doing whatever it takes to bring humanity back to Eden to dwell in His presence. Consider 6 proofs.

Proof #1: The Covenants

Was is the goal of every covenant? Why did God covenant with Abraham, Noah, Moses, and David? In order to bind us in cords of an unbreakable relationship. Exodus 6:7 “I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God.”

Proof #2: The Incarnation

Why did the Father send His Son into the world in the likeness of men? So that God could be with us! Matthew 1:23 “...and they shall call his name Immanuel” which means, *God with us.*”

Proof #3: Jesus’ High Priestly Prayer

What did Jesus pray before He went to the cross? John 17:24 “Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, *may be with me where I am*, to see my glory.”

Proof #4: The Atonement

Why did Jesus suffer and die for our sins? So that we could be brought to God Himself. 1 Peter 3:18 “For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, *that he might bring us to God.*”

Proof #5: The Holy Spirit

Jesus promised the Holy Spirit when He ascended into Heaven precisely so that the Father and Son could dwell within us. John 14:23 “If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, *and we will come to him and make our home with him.*”

Proof #6: The 2nd Coming

Why is Jesus coming again? 1 Thessalonians 4:17 “Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, *and so we will always be with the Lord.*”

Experimental Use

Loved ones, don't you see that is what is happening in our passage? v.20 God says “Let many people go, *that they may serve me.*” What does God want? *Mere* freedom for His people? No. Grab ahold of yourself this morning, remind yourself of *why* you are a Christian. Did God save from the bondage of sin *only* so that you could be free of guilt? Did God save you from the second death *only* so that you would not have to be afraid? No! God saved you so that you could dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of your life. Deliverance without being brought to dwell with God—to serve Him, feast with Him, delight in Him—is no deliverance of all. Liberation, freedom, a guilt-free life, confidence in death *by themselves* can never satisfy the human soul. *God has put eternity in our hearts*, and only the eternal, infinite God can fill that chasm.

Consolatory Use

So dear friends, take comfort, don't let your hearts be troubled. Even when you forget the goal of your salvation, even when you forget *why you are a*

Christian, God does not. “Let my people go” —He said to sin, death, and the devil —“that they may serve Me.” God’s aim for our lives is infinitely bigger than the crumbs we sadly settle for. God will not stop. He is the Hound of Heaven, and his Divine Pursuit will not be frustrated until You are brought to Himself. Every sin will be conquered, every enemy vanquished, every stronghold defeated until at last He has brought you back to Himself. That’s our **first point**: *God will do whatever it takes (including overturning empires) to bring us to Himself.*

II. The Divine Distinction

Something new

Something new occurs in this plague. In the first three plagues it seems the Hebrews suffered alongside of the Egyptians. Perhaps God was disciplining them for their idolatry since they were just as guilty as the Egyptians.⁷ But in this plague, God does something new. Look at v.22 “But on that day I will set apart the land of Goshen, where my people dwell, so that no swarms of flies shall be there...” Stop. The land of Goshen where Israel lived was in *the middle region* of Egypt. Goshen had Egypt to the North, West, South and East. Think about that children. Imagine filling up your bathtub at home, and as the water is filling up the bath tub, a perfect square in the center of it doesn’t fill with water. How would you react if that happened? Wow! Part of the miracle of this

⁷ To the Egyptians these plagues were Divine retribution. To God’s elect, these plagues were Fatherly chastisement. Hebrews 12:5-8 And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? “My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. ⁶ For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.” ⁷ It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline?

⁸ If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons.”

plague is that God set up an invisible fence around Goshen so that not one insect He sends can invade His people.

In the midst of the earth

The *main reason* God does this is given at the end of v.22 “...*that you may know* that I am the LORD in the midst of the earth.” One of the truths about God is that because He is an infinite Being, He is invisible, because He transcends time and space. We sang this truth in our first song: “Immortal, invisible, God only wise, In light inaccessible hid from our eyes.” So then, how does the invisible God make Himself “seen?”⁸ In His mighty works.⁹ God set apart Goshen so that all of Egypt would know that He was God above all other gods. That no other power could match His, that no other wisdom could match His, that no other majesty could match His.

- Psalm 89:5-6 “Let the heavens praise your wonders, O Lord...⁶ For who in the skies can be compared to the Lord? Who among the heavenly beings is like the Lord?”
- Deuteronomy 3:24 “For what god is there in heaven or on earth who can do such works and mighty acts as yours?”

God performs mighty deeds in the earth, so that all of humanity would know that He is the LORD in the midst of the earth and no other.

⁸ Beethoven died before any of us were born—he is invisible to us—but we know he lives because he has left us His works.

⁹ In creation, in providence, in redemption.

“Thus I will put a *redemption*”

But there is another reason God sets Goshen apart. Look at v.23 “Thus I will put a division between my people and your people. Tomorrow¹⁰ *this sign* shall happen.”” Notice this division between Egypt and Goshen is a *sign*. A sign of what? Redemption. The Hebrew word for division is redemption. Your Bible probably has a footnote. Redemption is the price paid to free a slave or to clear a debt. The division between Egypt and Goshen was *a sign* that the Hebrews have been redeemed from their bondage. The division was *a sign* that Israel no longer belonged to Pharaoh because God had redeemed them and they now belonged to Him.

So began the ruin of Egypt

v.24 “And the LORD did so. There came great swarms of flies into the house of Pharaoh and into his servants' houses. Throughout all the land of Egypt the land was *ruined* by the swarms of flies.” Ruined. The verb tense indicates a continuous action, meaning “the land was in the process” of being ruined.¹¹ There was more ruin to come, but thus began Egypt’s ruin. Israel was in the process of redemption, but Egypt in the process of ruin.

2nd Principle: God sets apart His people in this world

That brings us to our **second principle**: *Throughout history God always makes a distinction between those who are His and those who are not.* This principle is all over Scripture.

¹⁰ “Lastly, it is to be observed that time for repentance is again given to Pharaoh, so that, if he were curable, he might prevent the punishment denounced against him: for God might have sent the insects at the moment; but He assigns the morrow, to prove the wickedness of the tyrant.” John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries Vol. II*, (Grand Rapids, MI.: BakerBooks, 2009), pg. 170

¹¹ Currid, pg. 187

- God made a distinction between Noah's family and the rest of mankind, saving Noah on the ark and drowning everyone else (Genesis 7:23).
- God made a distinction between Abraham's family and the rest of mankind, calling Abraham to begin a new nation from which the Messiah would come (Genesis 12:1-3).
- God made a distinction between His own people in the Babylonian captivity, calling His remnant the good figs whom He would preserve and the reprobate the bad figs whom He would destroy (Jeremiah 24).

History vs. Eternity

This distinction is clear at the final judgment when Christ separates the sheep from the goats (Matthew 25:31-46). But what I want you to see in our text, is that this distinction *happens in history*. Meaning, *God still makes this distinction now*. Malachi 3:18 "Then once more you shall see *the distinction* between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve him." 2 Peter 2:9 "...the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment."

Informatory Use

Children, boys and girls, God makes a distinction with you. Having one or both of your parents as believers in Jesus Christ means that God has made a distinction between you and children of the world. 1 Corinthians 7:14 says that you are *holy children*. Meaning you are *set apart*. Oh what an incredible privilege you have! Whereas worldly children are discipled in the darkness of this world, you are discipled under Lord Jesus Christ. Whereas worldly children are schooled in evil things, you are schooled by the Holy Spirit. Whereas worldly

have the devil as their father, you have God as your Father. Don't take it for granted. Cling to the LORD Jesus by faith. Praise Him for the unspeakable mercy you were born into. Thank Him that you belong to Goshen and not Egypt.

Consolatory/Admonitory Use

This doctrine is a great comfort for the Christian, but a great warning to those on the outside.

- Oh dear saint, consider the distinction between your peace and the peace of the wicked. “You have a peace that surpasses all understanding” (Philippians 4:7). “But the wicked are like the tossing sea...there is no peace,” says my God, “for the wicked” (Isaiah 57:20-21)
- Dear child of God, consider the distinction between your prayers and the prayers of the wicked. God always hears your prayers. Proverbs 15:29 “[the LORD] hears the prayer of the righteous.” But He does not listen to the wicked (John 9:31).
- Loved ones, consider the distinction between what Spirit resides in you and what spirit resides in the wicked. You have been given the Holy Spirit whose fruits are “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³gentleness, self-control.”¹² But the wicked are slaves of the evil one—given over to the works of the flesh, and God threatens that “*those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.*”¹³
- Consider the distinction between the evil things that happen to you and the evil things that happen to wicked. Every evil thing that happens to you dear

¹² Galatians 5:22-23

¹³ Galatians 5:21

saint, God has promised to work together for your good.¹⁴ Romans 8:28 “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.” Nothing will be wasted. All things, even your own sin will ultimately work together for your good. But all things do not work for good for the wicked. They are in the process of being ruined, even now. All things are storing up wrath for his day of judgment. God warns them in Romans 2:5 “But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed.”

Elenctic Use

But you might say: *“I’m a Christian, I don’t see this distinction. I’m suffering worse than many non-Christians I know. I’m in greater need, under greater distress, under greater sorrow than many non-Christians I know.”*¹⁵ Oh dear friend, don’t judge the matter too quickly. Joseph suffered in prison and then was brought to the right hand of Pharaoh. Jonah was swallowed by and then became the deliverer of the gospel to Nineveh. Naomi lost her husband and then her two sons, and then became the matriarch of the Messiah. Don’t judge the matter too quickly. Christ didn’t only suffer, He rose from the dead. You too will be raised up. You too will dwell in the House of the LORD all the days of Your life. You too will be comforted. Take heart, God is Your God. That’s our **second point**: *God always makes a distinction between those who are His and those who are not.*

¹⁴ Romans 8:28.

¹⁵ Also see Richard Sibbes, *A Heavenly Conference Between Christ and Mary*, (Carlisle, PA.: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1654), pg. 127

III. The Divine Deliverer

The compromise of the unconverted

So Egypt was in the process of being ruined. v.25 “Then Pharaoh called Moses and Aaron and said, “Go, sacrifice to your God *within the land.*”” Notice the sorcerers are not called in this time. They were already shown to be impotent against Yahweh. Pharaoh seems to concede here. “Go, sacrifice to your God,”¹⁶ *but* he adds “within the land.” This is what the unconverted man attempts in every age, they try to compromise with God, they try to offer a third way, a middle ground.

God commanded that Israel be set free *to serve Him in the wilderness*,
but Pharaoh offered that they could *serve Him in Egypt*.

Experimental Use

Perhaps you are like Pharaoh this morning. You are unconverted, you know what God requires of you, but you are trying to compromise with God. You are trying to offer Him 1/2 obedience. “Ok God I’ll obey you, I’ll sacrifice to you, but I’ll do it in Egypt.” Dear friend, “God will not share your heart.”¹⁷ He must have all of you or none of you. 1 John 2:15 “If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.” Matthew 6:24 “No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other.” Pharaoh showed that he loved his own rights more than God’s. Dear unconverted friend, whose rights do you love more? Yours or

¹⁶ But even here Pharaoh refuses to call God by His Name Yahweh, and instead calls Him Elohim. After Moses takes his stand, then Pharaoh calls Him Yahweh in v.28

¹⁷ Ryken, pg. 230

God's? You must either relinquish your rights to the LORD of Heaven and meet Him there, or retain your rights and go to hell. God never compromises.

God never compromises

That's precisely how Moses answers. Look at v.26 "But Moses said, "It would not be right to do so, for the offerings we shall sacrifice to the LORD our God are an abomination to the Egyptians. If we sacrifice offerings abominable to the Egyptians before their eyes, will they not stone us?" Moses says NO to the most powerful man in the world! And he gives reasons 1) Yahweh's worship will be despised by the Egyptians. Moses' chief concern is God's honor. He will not allow, as Calvin says, God's worship to be exposed "to the reproaches and sneers of the Gentiles."¹⁸ 2) The Egyptians worshiped these animals that Israel was called to sacrifice. Their worship would end in bloodshed because the Egyptians wouldn't stand for it. So Moses says in v.27 "We must go three days' journey into the wilderness and sacrifice to the Lord our God *as he tells us.*"

Hortatory Use

Dear congregation, Moses is an incredible example of how we ought never to compromise with the clear commands of the LORD. Imitate Him. Everyday we are face choices where we can compromise the clear commands of the Lord. And sometimes they can seem reasonable. Pharaoh seemed 'reasonable.' 'Serve the LORD, but do it in the land.' But it is never reasonable to give the Lord only half of what He commands. You may be called fanatical, you may be ridiculed, and scorned. But you worship a God who can turn water into blood, call frogs from the deep, turn dust into gnats, and call forth an army of

¹⁸ Calvin, pg. 173

bugs. Who is the fanatical one? The Pharaoh's of this world who keep returning to their own folly? Or the one who follows the LORD? Never compromise the clear commands of the LORD to appease the world.

Please pray for me

When Pharaoh saw that Moses wouldn't budge, he says in v.28 "I will let you go to sacrifice to the LORD your God in the wilderness; only you must not go very far away. Plead for me." Pharaoh concedes the point and begs for prayer. The bugs were unbearable.

²⁹ Then Moses said, "Behold, I am going out from you and *I will plead with the LORD* that the swarms of flies may depart from Pharaoh, from his servants, and from his people, tomorrow. Only let not Pharaoh cheat again by not letting the people go to sacrifice to the LORD." ³⁰ So Moses went out from Pharaoh and *prayed to the LORD*. ³¹ *And the LORD did* as Moses asked, and removed the swarms of flies from Pharaoh, from his servants, and from his people; not one remained."

Not one remained

Moses prayed and the LORD listened. Moses prayed and every single bug, every beetle, every fly—large or small left Egypt. Their complete disappearance was just as sudden as their arrival. Not so with the other plagues. The bloody Nile remained 7 days, the frogs were heaped into stinky piles, the gnats remained *it seems* until they died off. *But* here the LORD immediately removed the bugs. Not one remained. The land was cured.

3rd Principle: The LORD removes every last bug

And so we arrive at our **third principle**: *When the LORD cures—He cures completely, immediately, and irrevocably.* Dear friends, how do we see Jesus Christ healing in the gospels? He removes the plague instantly.

- Matthew 8:3 “And immediately His leprosy was cleansed.” Not one spot remained.
- Luke 8:44 “She came up behind him and touched the fringe of his garment, and immediately her discharge of blood ceased.” Not one drop of blood remained.
- Mark 5:13 “And the unclean spirits came out, and entered the pigs...and were drowned in the sea.” Not one demon remained.

Consolatory Use

Dear friends this is what Jesus does in His great work of redemption, in the True and Better Exodus. When Christ was crucified on the tree, He took every sin that has harassed you, stung you, infected you, destroyed you. Not one sin remains. The penalty is removed completely, immediately, irrevocably.

Elenctic Use

But you say “I still sin.” That’s true, and we will until Jesus brings us home. But consider what we’ve heard this morning. Will that sin stop you from entering His rest? No! God has overturned empires to have you. He’s made a distinction between your sin as a Christian and the sin that belongs to the worldling. God has promised to cause all your sin to work together for the good. Yes you still sin. But the blood of Jesus Christ has removed all the penalty of your sin. None of God’s wrath remains. Not one curse remains. Every sin is

atoned for. Every wrong punished on the Son and buried in the grave. The LORD has done it all. Not one sin remains.

Admonitory Use

If you are here this morning, and your heart is like Pharaoh's—hardened, always wanting to bargain with the Lord, refusing to give up your rights to Him, please hear the word of the Lord. God makes a distinction between you and His people. Right now you are on the outside, in the process of ruin. If refuse to listen to His voice, you will suffer eternal ruin. Turn to Jesus Christ. He alone can remove Your plague of sin. He alone can forgive you. And He promises to do that if you call on Him by faith alone. "If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."¹⁹ Every sin will be removed. Not one will remain.

¹⁹ Romans 10:9

