

Exodus 8:20-32

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/exod/exod-8/exodus-820-32/>

Starting in 8:20, the second cycle of plagues begins. The first in this cycle, the fourth plague (8:20-32) involves an infestation of flies. As in the first plague, Moses and Aaron confronted Pharaoh as he was going to bathe in the Nile. The LORD commanded Pharaoh to release the Israelites and then threatened him with another plague if he does not comply. The Israelites were not affected by this plague, but the rest of Egypt was devastated by it. Pharaoh called for Moses and Aaron and told them to go offer sacrifices to the LORD. Moses declined the offer due to the fact that the nature of Israelite sacrifice would offend the Egyptians and hence would endanger the lives the Israelites. Moses also told Pharaoh that he would entreat the LORD to remove the swarm of flies from the land. He also warned Pharaoh not to go back on his word like he did in the previous plague. The LORD then removed every one of the flies, but Pharaoh hardened his heart again and did not set the Israelites free.

In verses 20-23, the LORD dictated His message for Moses and Aaron to relay to Pharaoh. It parallels the first plague in many ways. The LORD commanded Moses and Aaron *to rise early in the morning and present yourself before Pharaoh, as he comes out to the water*, which is identical to the first plague (7:15). Their message was similar to what is in the first plague – *let My people go, that they may serve Me*. This is a slightly shorter version of what is in 7:16.

The next part of the message was a warning of what would happen if Pharaoh did not comply with the LORD's command. The LORD warned *if you do not let My people go, behold, I will send swarms of flies*. The word "flies" is not in the Hebrew – it says simply "I will send swarms," which, though it suggests insects, has raised the question of what kind of insect is in view here. One suggestion is that it was a swarm of beasts or reptiles. Another idea is that the Greek translation interpreted it as the dog-fly (which is also called a gad-fly, a blood-sucking, vicious insect). Yet another suggestion is that it is the normal house-fly, which is the symbol of Egypt as seen in [Isaiah 7:18](#). A less popular suggestion is that it refers to the beetle, which eats plants, animals, and other things. It seems that either the gad-fly or house-fly best fits the context here.

The LORD then described the extent of the infestation, saying to Pharaoh that it will be *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*. In other words, there would be no place in Egypt where the swarm would not take place. There was one exception – the LORD declared that *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*, the purpose being *in order that you may know that I, the Lord, am in the midst of the land*. To prove once again that the LORD is sovereign over all of nature, He prevents the flies from affecting the land of Goshen, where the Israelites live. Thus, He *will put a division between My people and your people*. In this plague, the LORD treated His people with grace and brought judgment to the Egyptians. The LORD then told Pharaoh when it will begin – *tomorrow*. Only a sovereign God can control when and where an infestation of insects can occur.

After the warning, *the Lord did so*. Just as He said, *there came great swarms of flies into the house of Pharaoh and the houses of his servants*. Its effect was horrible because *the land was laid waste because of the swarms of flies in all the land of Egypt*. The Hebrew word for “laid waste” is a strong word, implying that the land was completely ruined.

Another indication that this plague was very bad is that in verse 25 *Pharaoh called for Moses and Aaron and said, “Go, sacrifice to your God within the land.”* It appeared that this plague finally broke Pharaoh’s hardened heart and convinced him to let the Israelites go. He did, however, placed a limit on their travels by requiring them to stay “in the land.” By doing this, Pharaoh maintained his sovereignty over them, and likely planned to prevent them from leaving permanently.

Moses provided another proposal that might be agreeable to Pharaoh. *Moses said, “It is not right to do so, for we will sacrifice to the Lord our God what is an abomination to the Egyptians.”* Moses was trying to explain that the God of Israel had explicit requirements for the sacrificial system. Moses explained *that if we sacrifice what is an abomination to the Egyptians before their eyes, will they not then stone us?* The sacrifices offered to the LORD required animals that the Egyptians considered sacred and were thus worshipped and revered. This would be quite unacceptable to the Egyptians, and they might feel compelled to kill the Israelites for being disrespectful of Egyptian worship. This was a persuasive argument to Pharaoh, since he clearly fears losing the Hebrew slave labor.

Based on this perceived danger to the Israelites, Moses explained that *we must go a three days' journey into the wilderness and sacrifice to the Lord our God*. This repeats the very first demand to Pharaoh in 5:1-3. Moses made sure to emphasize that these requirements were not Moses' idea – they were simply doing *as He commands us*.

Pharaoh finally relents. In verse 28, *Pharaoh said, "I will let you go, that you may sacrifice to the Lord your God in the wilderness; only you shall not go very far away*. The word "I" is emphatic in the Hebrew, indicating that Pharaoh tried to communicate that it was he who allowed Israel to go sacrifice and no other. Pharaoh offered to let the Israelites go (likely indication a temporary release), so long as they did not go a long distance away. Keeping them close would allow him to maintain his rule over them. Moses does not object to this requirement.

Pharaoh mentioned the LORD by name, something he has been reluctant to do. Pharaoh also requested that Moses *make supplication for me*. Since supplication worked in the plague of frogs (8:8), Pharaoh thought that it might work again to get rid of the flies. Pharaoh is beginning to recognize the power of the true God.

In verse 29, *Moses said, "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*. Moses responds to Pharaoh's emphatic "I" with his own emphatic "I" when he said that he was leaving. Moses promised to intercede again for him. He did not, however, allow Pharaoh to decide when the plague was to go away this time. Moses simply said that the flies would go away "tomorrow." This mimicked Pharaoh's choice in the plague of frogs. Moses then added a dire warning – *only do not let Pharaoh deal deceitfully again in not letting the people go to sacrifice to the Lord*. Moses was keenly aware of Pharaoh's tendency to make promises in order to get out of a bad situation then not fulfill those promises.

After the confrontation ended, *Moses went out from Pharaoh and made supplication to the Lord*. In verse 31, the LORD answered Moses' prayer and *the Lord did as Moses asked, and removed the swarms of flies from Pharaoh, from his servants and from his people*. The fact that *not one remained* is evidence that the LORD had total control over the flies.

This remarkable demonstration of the LORD's sovereignty over normally uncontrollable flies should have convinced Pharaoh that Moses' God is supreme. He should have agreed to Moses' terms, but

instead *Pharaoh hardened his heart this time also, and he did not let the people go*. Not only that, but Pharaoh's magicians are nowhere to be seen in this plague, implying that they were powerless either to replicate the plague or remove it from Egypt.

This plague shows both the Egyptians and the Israelites that the God of the Hebrews is Master of all nature. Even the Egyptian deities were not believed to control infestations of flies. But the LORD is in total control of all nature, including flies. He was able to keep them from entering the land of Goshen, and He take every one of them away. It also could be an attack on Egypt itself, since the fly was a symbol for the Egyptian kingdom. It showed that the LORD ruled the Egyptian empire, not Pharaoh.

Biblical Text:

²⁰ Now the Lord said to Moses, "Rise early in the morning and present yourself before Pharaoh, as he comes out to the water, and say to him, 'Thus says the Lord, "Let My people go, that they may serve Me. 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*. 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, in order that you may know that I, the Lord, am in the midst of the land. ²³ I will put a division between My people and your people. Tomorrow this sign will occur.'" 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.

²⁵ Pharaoh called for Moses and Aaron and said, "Go, sacrifice to your God within the land." ²⁶ But Moses said, "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? ²⁷ We must go a three days' journey into the wilderness and sacrifice to the Lord our God as He commands us." ²⁸ Pharaoh said, "I will let you go, that you may sacrifice to the Lord your God in the wilderness; only you shall not go very far away. Make supplication for me." ²⁹ Then Moses said, "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; only do not let Pharaoh deal deceitfully again in not letting the people go to sacrifice to the Lord.”

³⁰ So Moses went out from Pharaoh and made supplication to the Lord.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.³² But Pharaoh hardened his heart this time also, and he did not let the people go.