

## Exodus 9:8-12

### Introduction

This morning we come to the sixth plague – the third and last plague of the second cycle. The end of “round two.” After the water turned to blood, the swarms of frogs, the gnats that were as many as the dust of the earth, the swarming insects, and the death of the livestock, we come to chapter nine, verses eight to nine:

**I. Exodus 9:8-9** — And the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, “Take handfuls of soot from the kiln, and let Moses throw them in the air in the sight [toward the eyes] of Pharaoh. It shall become fine dust over all the land of Egypt, and become boils breaking out in sores on man and beast throughout all the land of Egypt.”

Right away there’s something here that jumps out at us – and that’s when Yahweh tells Moses *what to do* so that boils might break out on man and beast. In the first cycle of three plagues, it was *always* the *staff* of Moses or Aaron that brought about each new plague. In the first plague, Aaron took his *staff* and *stretched out his hand* over the waters of Egypt, and struck the water in the Nile so that all the water in the Nile turned into blood. (Exod. 7:19-20) In the second plague, Aaron *stretched out his hand* with his *staff* over the waters of Egypt so that frogs came up and covered the land of Egypt. (Exod. 8:5-6) And in the third plague, Aaron *stretched out his hand* with his *staff* and struck the dust of the earth so that all the dust of the earth became gnats in all the land of Egypt. (Exod. 8:17)

In the third and last cycle of three plagues, once again it will be the *staff* of Moses that brings about each new plague. So in the seventh plague, Moses will *stretch out his hand* with his *staff* toward heaven so that there will be hail in all the land of Egypt. (Exod. 9:22-23) In the eighth plague, Moses will *stretch out his hand* with his *staff* over the land of Egypt so that locusts will come upon the land of Egypt. (Exod. 10:12-13) And in the ninth plague, Moses will *stretch out his hand* (with his *staff*) toward heaven, so that there will be darkness over the land of Egypt. (Exod. 10:21-22)

Of course, it’s been obvious all along that there’s nothing magical about the staff itself. The staff is only a symbol of the mighty power of Yahweh; and so the staff of Moses or Aaron can just as appropriately be called “the staff of God.” (Exod. 4:20; cf. 4:17; 7:17, 19-20, 25) But *why* does the Lord work all six of these plagues through the visible instrument of the staff, when He could have done everything just as easily without the staff? Well, isn’t the main point to prove that Moses and Aaron are His servants, and that if Pharaoh and his servants and all the people of Israel are to listen to Yahweh, then they must listen to the words that He speaks *through* Moses and Aaron? It was never Moses’ place to demand that the people of Israel follow his leadership, but the Lord wants to insure that the people obey Moses and listen to his word. The staff of Moses authenticates Moses as an instrument of divine revelation from the immortal, invisible God whose name is Yahweh. So in chapter fourteen, the Lord will tell Moses to lift up his hand and *stretch out his staff* over the sea so that it might be divided and the Israelites go through the midst of the sea on dry land. (Exod. 14:16) After the Israelites have crossed, the Lord will tell

Moses to *stretch out his hand* over the sea again so that the waters might cover the Egyptians. (Exod. 14:26-27) And then we read in Exodus chapter fourteen verse thirty-one:

- ✓ Exodus 14:31 (cf. 19:9) — Israel saw the great power that the LORD used against the Egyptians, so the people feared the LORD, and *they believed in the LORD AND in his servant Moses*.

In the same way, when Jesus came, Peter says that he was “a man *attested*... by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him.” (Acts 2:22) The signs and wonders that Jesus performed just by the power of His spoken word verify not only that He was sent by God to *speak* His word to us, but also that He came from God in order to *be* the very Word of God to us. So if we would listen to God the Father, then we must listen to the word that He has spoken *through* His Son (John 14:7-11)—who speaks to us not only in the pages of the Old Testament (cf. 1 Pet. 1:11), but of course, in the Gospels, and then through His Apostles, who were also attested to the church by God with signs, and wonders, and mighty works. (2 Corinthians 12:12; cf. Rom. 15:18-19) Aren’t we grateful that the immortal, invisible God is a God who speaks His word to us? Aren’t we grateful that God has authenticated all His prophets and Apostles, and now preserved His word to us in the pages of Scripture?

So in the first cycle of three plagues and in the last cycle of three plagues, it’s *always explicitly* the *staff* of Moses or Aaron that brings about each new plague. But in the middle set of three plagues, the staff is never mentioned. In the plague of the swarming insects, all we’re told is that “the Lord did so.” (Exod. 8:24) And in the death of the Egyptian livestock, all we’re told is that “the Lord did this thing.” (Exod. 9:6) Maybe this was to guard against any possible idea that the staff itself was magical. God can still unleash His plagues with or without Moses’ or Aaron’s staff. So we must not tie God down to a staff. Israel must not think that God is at the “beck and call” of Moses. God is sovereign, and free, and does only and always according to His good pleasure. If there was *any* visible action that brought about these two plagues, we’re not told *anything* about what it might have been.

But then we come to the third and last plague in this middle set of three, and once again we find that Moses is instructed to do something in order to bring about this plague – only there’s still no mention of the staff. This time, instead of stretching out their hands with a staff, Moses and Aaron are to take handfuls of soot from the kiln, and Moses is to throw these handfuls of soot in the air in the sight of Pharaoh. Not only does the Lord tell Moses and Aaron to take handfuls of *soot*, but He specifies soot *from the kiln*. Not only this, but the Lord explicitly and uniquely says in this plague that the action of throwing the soot in the air is to be performed *in the sight of Pharaoh*.<sup>1</sup> Surely, this is significant. Surely, this all means something.

We know that the Israelites have been working to make bricks for their Egyptian masters. We read in Exodus chapter one:

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<sup>1</sup> The only other time where we hear of Moses bringing on the plague in the sight of Pharaoh is when the water of the Nile is turned to blood. (Exod. 7:20) In many of the other plagues, it seems we could assume that Moses (or Aaron) stretched out his staff *away* from the presence of Pharaoh. (cf. Exod. 9:18, 22-23)

- ✓ Exodus 1:13–14 — So [the Egyptians] ruthlessly made the people of Israel work as slaves and made their lives bitter with hard service, in mortar and brick, and in all kinds of work in the field. In all their work they ruthlessly made them work as slaves.

In chapter five, we saw that the Israelites were no longer to be given straw, and yet they were still to deliver the same number of bricks. And so their labor at brick making was made even more hard and bitter than before.

Now in Egypt (as opposed to Babylonia), bricks were usually hardened by baking them in the sun rather than burning them in a kiln.<sup>2</sup> But it seems we can still assume at the very least that the Egyptians would not have been ignorant of the fact that bricks burnt in a kiln were virtually indestructible, while bricks only baked in the sun were far more vulnerable to the elements (especially to rain). It seems certain that the kiln here in Exodus 9 is not an oven for baking bread because we saw a very different Hebrew word used for these ovens in chapter eight.

- ✓ Exodus 8:3 — The Nile shall swarm with frogs that shall come up... into your ovens and your kneading bowls.

In fact, the Hebrew word for “kiln” here appears only two other times in the Old Testament in descriptions of the smoke that rose from Sodom and Gomorrah and the smoke that rose from Mount Sinai “like the smoke of a kiln.” (Gen. 19:28; Exod. 19:18) This kind of a kiln, or furnace, could be used for burning lime, or smelting ore, or firing pottery, (Klopfenstein, ZPEB; EBD) or (I presume) burning *bricks*. So the NLT actually translates verse eight like this:

- ✓ Exodus 9:8 (NLT) — Then the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, “Take handfuls of soot from a *brick kiln*, and have Moses toss it into the air...

If this isn't a brick kiln, then the whole idea of soot from a kiln *seems* extremely arbitrary and random(!); and that would be a very strange thing given how strategic and purposeful everything else has been. On the other hand, a brick kiln would explain everything perfectly.

Already, we've seen how the plagues that Yahweh has sent on the Egyptians have been designed to *fit the crime*. If the Egyptians will kill the Israelite baby boys by throwing them in the Nile River, then God will turn the Nile River into blood for the Egyptians to drink. If the Egyptians will seek to oppose or exploit the fertility and fruitfulness of God's people, then God will plague the Egyptians with fertility and fruitfulness (swarms of frogs and gnats like the dust of the earth). And so it would seem that here we have the continuation of this same theme. (cf. Enns) If the Egyptians will ruthlessly make the life of God's people bitter with hard service in mortar and brick, then God will take this very symbol of Israel's oppression (the soot from a kiln), and use it to bring oppression and affliction to the Egyptians. That which symbolizes the sweat and

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<sup>2</sup> Scholars point out that while many brick kilns have been discovered in ancient Babylonia, “almost” none have been found in Egypt. (Kitchen, NBD; Elwell & Beitzel, BEB) Apparently, this means that *some* brick kilns *have* been found in Egypt? But from what period? Are the brick kilns found in Babylonia from a significantly later period than the time of Moses? Could there be some other historical/environmental reason why almost no brick kilns have been found in the Nile river valley? Couldn't the pottery kilns have also been used for baking bricks on a small scale (perhaps only for specific applications; see dictionaries)?

physical suffering of the Israelites will now be the tool that God uses to bring severe and extreme physical suffering to the Egyptians. (cf. Cassuto; Enns; Currid; Kaiser) And so, in fact, this is the very first time that God puts His plague directly on the Egyptians themselves. And, of course, this would also explain the very careful emphasis on performing this action *in the sight* of Pharaoh.<sup>3</sup> God will be sure that Pharaoh makes the *connection* between the suffering that he has inflicted upon God’s own people, and now his own suffering and the suffering of his people. The symbolism of the sign is graphic and vivid; it could hardly have been mistaken by anyone. (contra, Houtman; referenced in Enns) And so we read in verse ten:

**II. Exodus 9:10** — So they took soot from the kiln and stood before Pharaoh. And Moses threw it in the air, and it became boils breaking out in sores on man and beast.

If these boils are anything like the boils that afflicted Job (cf. Job 2:7-8), then we can hardly imagine the pain and suffering the Egyptians must have been experiencing. That actually seems to be the point of the way they’re described here: “boils breaking out in sores.” So a number of versions translate, “festering boils.” (cf. NET; NIV; NRSV; HCSB) As one commentator says, these boils were utterly “debilitating.” (Stuart) They may not have caused death, but as Job himself expressed it, sometimes death may seem preferable to life. (cf. Job 3)

Here in this sixth plague, the stakes have truly been “upped.” The Egyptians are being made to drink their own medicine. The pain and suffering that they have inflicted upon God’s people will now be visited upon them through God’s wrath, and burning anger, and indignation.

But now, all of a sudden, we read in verse eleven:

**III. Exodus 9:11** — And the magicians could not stand before Moses because of the boils, for the boils came upon the magicians and upon all the Egyptians.

Now we haven’t heard about the magicians since the third plague (the plague of gnats). So why do they come up again (and for the last time), right here?

In the opening sign of the staff turned into a serpent, the magicians—the wise men and the sorcerers of Egypt—also turned their staffs into serpents by their secret arts, but Aaron’s staff “swallowed up” their staffs. God allowed the magicians to perform their counterfeit miracle only in order to make His own sovereign statement – Pharaoh and the Egyptians will be swallowed up and destroyed. In the first two plagues, the magicians are able to copy and imitate what Moses does by their secret arts, but that’s precisely the point. They can’t undo or reverse what Moses has done; instead, all they can do *by their secret arts* is add to the misery of their own people. So finally, in the third plague, now that God has made a complete *mockery* of the Egyptian magicians He simply sets them aside.

✓ **Exodus 8:18** — The magicians tried by their secret arts to produce gnats, but they could not.

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<sup>3</sup> Literally, “toward the eyes of”; Durham translates, “in full sight” (“before the very eyes of” in 7:20)

In the fourth and fifth plagues (insects and livestock), we may assume that the magicians were still called to be present, but also still completely powerless to perform *even their counterfeit* miracles.

But in the midst of this making a mockery of the magicians, it can't be forgotten that they have still wickedly sought to oppose and stand against Yahweh, the God of Israel. They have worked to provide Pharaoh with every reason possible to keep Yahweh's people ruthlessly enslaved in cruel bondage. And so it's only appropriate now to point out that the magicians *in particular* have been afflicted with festering boils – to the point that they were no longer even able to stand before Moses. In the Hebrew, this is a blatant play on words with verse ten, which says: “So [Moses and Aaron] took soot from the kiln *and stood before Pharaoh.*” In no other plague is it ever said that anyone stands before anyone!<sup>4</sup> But here, when Moses *stands* before Pharaoh the result, of course, is that “the magicians *could NOT stand before Moses.*” On one level, this certainly means that the magicians were *physically* unable to “*stand*” in Moses' presence. (cf. Deut. 28:35; Currid; Stuart; Childs) But on another level, Moses “standing before” Pharaoh and the magicians' “standing before” Moses very clearly highlights the *opposition* between the two parties, and the “*stand*” that they are taking against each other.<sup>5</sup> The Apostle Paul refers to these magicians in 2 Timothy chapter three when he's warning against false teachers.

✓ 2 Timothy 3:8 — Just as Jannes and Jambres *opposed* Moses, so these men also *oppose* the truth.

Since the magicians of Egypt have taken their “stand” against Moses in order to keep the Lord's people in cruel suffering, therefore now the magicians will be unable even to physically “stand” before Moses because of their own painful, horrible suffering. And remember that their suffering was delivered to them via the soot of a kiln – a symbol of Israel's suffering.

And so the theme of just retribution and payback, and even of vengeance *continues*. And as the Apostle Paul also says, the “folly” of the Egyptians magicians was made “plain to all.” (2 Tim. 3:8-9; cf. Acts 13:6-11) May we never again be “embarrassed” over the “success” of the magicians of Egypt; because the “success” of the magicians was ultimately only in exposing their own complete folly and testifying to the absolute sovereignty of Yahweh. Nevertheless, we read in verse twelve:

**IV. Exodus 9:12** — But the LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh, and he did not listen to them, as the LORD had spoken to Moses.

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<sup>4</sup> “Stand,” in verse 13, is a rendering of a different Hebrew word.

<sup>5</sup> “The magicians... literally (and vocationally) ‘could not stand’ before Moses.” (Kaiser) “The more probable meaning, reflected in the translation above, is that the learned men, afflicted as were their countrymen, no longer had any will to oppose or resist Moses and his God.” (Durham) “[The magicians] were no longer able to stand up to [in opposition to] Moses.” (Durham) I differ from Durham by taking the reference “literally” while still seeing the literal reference as an *intended* metaphor for a spiritual (“vocal”; Kaiser) opposition.

## Conclusion

Last week, we saw that among other things, these plagues are an expression of God's wrath, and indignation, and burning anger against Egypt. (cf. Ps. 78:49) This week we're reminded that this wrath, and indignation, and burning anger against Egypt is not simply because Pharaoh is refusing to listen to God, or because of Egypt's pagan idolatry. After all, the Israelites will very quickly prove that they are also stubborn and idolatrous.

God pours out His plagues of "distress" (cf. Ps. 78:49) and suffering upon Egypt specifically because Egypt has dared to cause the distress and suffering of His chosen people. God would not have anyone miss the *connection* between His own treatment of Pharaoh, and Pharaoh's treatment of Yahweh's people. God would not have us miss the *connection* between His treatment of the magicians, and the magicians' treatment of Yahweh's people. It's through this "poetic justice" of the plagues that we see clearly that they are—all of them—divine retribution for the distress and suffering that Egypt has dared to cause God's chosen people.<sup>6</sup>

And so we see that in all those years of apparent silence, Yahweh was keeping careful record. In all those years of suffering, Yahweh was carefully putting all the tears of His people in His bottle (cf. Ps. 56:7-9) In all those years of God seeming to look the other way, not for a single moment did it ever cease to be true that when Egypt touched God's people, Egypt was touching the apple of God's eye. (cf. Zech. 2:8)

And so now the day of reckoning has come – the day that the enemies of God's people never, ever count on coming, and yet the day that God assures us in His Word will, always, unfailingly, come. (cf. 2 Kings 9:7)

- ✓ Isaiah 49:25–26 — Thus says the LORD: "...I will contend with those who contend with you... I will make your oppressors eat their own flesh, and they shall be drunk with their own blood as with wine. Then all flesh shall know that I am the LORD your Savior, and your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob."

One of the reasons that God hardened Pharaoh's heart was undoubtedly so that He might pour out on Pharaoh all the fullness of His vengeance. (cf. Exod. 4:22-23) The Apostle John writes of a vision that he saw which was patterned after the plagues of Exodus:

- ✓ Revelation 16:1–7 — Then I heard a loud voice from the temple telling the seven angels, "Go and pour out on the earth the seven bowls of the wrath of God." So the first angel went and poured out his bowl on the earth, and harmful and painful sores came upon the people who bore the mark of the beast and worshiped its image. The second angel poured out his bowl into the sea, and it became like the blood of a corpse, and every living thing died that was in the sea. The third angel poured out his bowl into the rivers and the springs of water, and they became blood. And I heard the angel in charge of the waters say, "Just are you, O Holy One, who is and who was, for you brought these judgments. For they have shed the blood of saints and prophets, and you have given them blood to drink. It is what they

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<sup>6</sup> Here is yet another theological reason (in addition to the grammatical/textual reasons) why we must assume that the Israelites were protected from the plagues.

deserve!” And I heard the [souls of the martyrs under the] altar saying, “Yes, Lord God the Almighty, true and just are your judgments!”

This is the day of vengeance that, before it comes, God’s persecuted people long for and cry out for both in the Old Testament and in the New.

- ✓ Psalm 79:10 — Why should the nations say, “Where is their God?” Let the avenging of the outpoured blood of your servants be known among the nations before our eyes!
- ✓ Revelation 6:9–10 — When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne. They cried out with a loud voice, “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?”

And it’s this day of reckoning that, when it does come, causes all the true people of God everywhere to be glad and sing for joy.

- ✓ Deuteronomy 32:43 — Rejoice with him, O heavens; bow down to him, all gods, for he avenges the blood of his children and takes vengeance on his adversaries.
- ✓ Revelation 19:1–3 (cf. 15:1-4) — After this I heard what seemed to be the loud voice of a great multitude in heaven, crying out, “Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for his judgments are true and just; for he has judged the great prostitute who corrupted the earth with her immorality, and has avenged on her the blood of his servants.” Once more they cried out, “Hallelujah! The smoke from her goes up forever and ever.”

So what’s the application of all this for us? Proverbs says:

- ✓ Proverbs 20:22 — Do not say, “I will repay evil”; wait for the LORD, and he will deliver you.

And the Apostle Paul exhorts us:

- ✓ Romans 12:19–21 (cf. Prov. 25:21-22) — Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” To the contrary, “if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

This is what we need to remember as the world around us grows darker, and God’s people are more, and more, and more hated – just as Jesus said we would be. What God’s people rejoice in is never the destruction of the wicked in and of itself, but rather the perfect, infinite justice of God *that vindicates and justifies all their patient endurance of suffering*. And so God’s plagues in Exodus remind us that though there are many “days” of reckoning, there is a final day of reckoning coming when God will mete out everlasting distress and anguish to all the unrepentant who have dared to touch His chosen people. Not one tear has ever gone uncounted. Not one drop of blood has ever gone unrecorded. (cf. Mat. 23:34-36) And so *therefore*, secure in *this* wonderful knowledge, God’s people are free to *wait*, and while they wait, to do *good* to their

enemies, overcoming evil with good. Secure in the knowledge of God's righteous vengeance and retributive justice, we are free to fulfill the command of Jesus:

- ✓ Matthew 5:38–40 — “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well.