

# OpenTheo

## March 2nd: Exodus 9 & Matthew 13:24-43

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Pestilence, boils, and hail. The Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds.

Leviticus 13 (the plague of leprosy); Deuteronomy 28:27, 35 (the boils of Egypt); Exodus 4:6-8 (the sign of leprosy).

Matthew 9:37-38 (fields white for harvest); Psalm 78 (the psalm Matthew references); Ezekiel 17 (the parable of the eagles and the cedar); Daniel 4:10-12 (Nebuchadnezzar as a tree); Daniel 2:35 (the stone growing to become a mountain that filled the earth).

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglican church.net/>).

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## Transcript

Exodus chapter 9 a distinction between the livestock of Israel and the livestock of Egypt, so that nothing of all that belongs to the people of Israel shall die. And the Lord set a time, saying, Tomorrow the Lord will do this thing in the land. And the next day the Lord did this thing.

All the livestock of the Egyptians died, but not one of the livestock of the people of Israel died. And Pharaoh sent, and behold, not one of the livestock of Israel was dead. But the

heart of Pharaoh was hardened, and he did not let the people go.

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 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. 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. And the magicians could not stand before Moses because of the boils, for the boils came upon the magicians and upon all the Egyptians. But the Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh, and he did not listen to them, as the Lord had spoken to Moses.

Then the Lord said to Moses, Rise up early in the morning, and present yourself before Pharaoh and say to him, Thus says the Lord, the God of the Hebrews, Let my people go that they may serve me. For this time I will send all my plagues on you yourself, and on your servants, and your people, so that you may know that there is none like me in all the earth. For by now I could have put out my hand and struck you and your people with pestilence, and you would have been cut off from the earth.

But for this purpose I have raised you up, to show you my power, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth. You are still exalting yourself against my people, and will not let them go. Behold, about this time tomorrow I will cause very heavy hail to fall, such as never has been in Egypt from the day it was founded until now.

Now therefore, send, get your livestock and all that you have in the field into safe shelter, for every man and beast that is in the field and is not brought home will die when the hail falls on them. Then whoever feared the word of the Lord among the servants of Pharaoh hurried his slaves and his livestock into the houses. But whoever did not pay attention to the word of the Lord left his slaves and his livestock in the field.

Then the Lord said to Moses, Stretch out your hand toward heaven, so that there may be hail in all the land of Egypt, on man and beast and every plant of the field in the land of Egypt. Then Moses stretched out his staff toward heaven, and the Lord sent thunder and hail, and fire ran down to the earth. And the Lord rained hail upon the land of Egypt.

There was hail and fire flashing continually in the midst of the hail, very heavy hail, such as had never been in all the land of Egypt since it became a nation. The hail struck down everything that was in the field in all the land of Egypt, both man and beast, and the hail struck down every plant of the field and broke every tree of the field. Only in the land of Goshen, where the people of Israel were, was there no hail.

Then Pharaoh sent and called Moses and Aaron and said to them, This time I have sinned. The Lord is in the right, and I and my people are in the wrong. Plead with the Lord, for there has been enough of God's thunder and hail.

I will let you go, and you shall stay no longer. Moses said to him, As soon as I have gone out of the city, I will stretch out my hands to the Lord. The thunder will cease, and there will be no more hail, so that you may know that the earth is the Lord's.

But as for you and your servants, I know that you do not yet fear the Lord God. The flax and the barley were struck down, for the barley was in the ear, and the flax was in bud. But the wheat and the emmer were not struck down, for they are late in coming up.

So Moses went out of the city from Pharaoh and stretched out his hands to the Lord, and the thunder and the hail ceased, and the rain no longer poured upon the earth. But when Pharaoh saw that the rain and the hail and the thunder had ceased, he sinned yet again, and hardened his heart, he and his servants. So the heart of Pharaoh was hardened, and he did not let the people of Israel go, just as the Lord had spoken through Moses.

In Exodus chapter 9 we arrive at the last two plagues of the second cycle of three plagues, and the first plague of the third cycle of plagues. As we've discussed already, the plagues happen in groups of three, so the first one begins in the morning, the next one is in the day, and then the final one comes without warning. God instructs Moses to go into Pharaoh and to inform him of a coming plague.

Moses by himself, without Aaron. There's no mention of the rod or of Aaron's action in the second cycle of plagues. This is a plague upon the livestock, and once again there's a distinction made between the Israelites and the Egyptians.

And God declares a time at which this event will occur. It says that all of the livestock of the Egyptians die, but a few verses later in the plague of the hail we see livestock again. So it seems to me that the statements are either hyperbolic, not intended to be taken in the strictly literal sense, like we might say everyone came out to support the team, recognising that presumably some people still stayed at home, but the group of people generally attended.

Or we could think about it only referring specifically to the livestock that are out in the field. So all of the livestock of the Egyptians, the livestock out in the field, are destroyed. The livestock are suffering on account of the sin of the Egyptians and the resistance of Pharaoh.

The natural order and the creatures are set into disarray and they suffer as a result of the sin of human beings. This is something we see at the curse. This is something that we see also in the flood.

Humanity is responsible for the well-being of the animals and as humanity sins, the whole of the creation suffers. It's not just human beings that suffer for their own sins. Our sins have consequences for the entire creation.

As the plague upon the livestock occurs, Pharaoh checks to see whether any of the

livestock of Israel were dead. He wants to ensure that God is actually doing this, that God is able to distinguish between his people and the Egyptians. Is this just an act of power or is it an act of precision as well? But even when he sees the evidence that God is a God of power and precision, he hardens his heart again.

The sixth plague, the final plague in the second cycle of plagues, comes without a prior warning. It's simply an act of judgement performed before Pharaoh and Moses performs the action in particular. Soot is taken from the kilns, that soot thrown up into the air becomes dust and then that dust breaks out and soars on man and beast throughout the land.

Once again there is likely symbolism here, a testimony to Egypt's oppression of Israel in forcing them to make bricks. Some have questioned this, saying that it isn't clear that the Egyptians used kilns for brick making rather than simply using sun-dried bricks. But other commentators dispute that claim, saying that during the period we do have evidence of fire-baked bricks, not just sun-dried bricks.

It's a symbolic action, connecting soot with the affliction that follows and also making clear that God is the one who brings about this problem. Boils elsewhere are associated with leprosy, in places like Leviticus 13 and in Deuteronomy chapter 28. The boils are explicitly associated with Egypt.

In verse 27 we read, "...the Lord will strike you with the boils of Egypt, and with tumours and scabs and itch, of which you cannot be healed." And then in verse 35, "...the Lord will strike you on the knees and on the legs with grievous boils, of which you cannot be healed, from the sole of your foot to the crown of your head." So the boils were associated with Egypt at that point and their very bodies are afflicted at this stage. This is not just the external inconvenience of the water being turned into blood, it's not just the discomfort and the unpleasantness of the frogs and the lice and the flies and these sorts of things. It is something that's striking in a more intimate place.

We might be reminded of the case of Job. Striking the body is a more severe and intimate attack. And there's a sort of living state of death, there's a putrefaction of the flesh.

And the association between leprosy and the plagues of Egypt might also come to mind here. The language that's used in association with the plagues also occurs in the context of the laws concerning leprosy in Leviticus chapter 13 and 14. Leprosy itself is called a plague in those places.

And also we might think back to the sign that's given to Moses, the second sign, as he puts his hand into his garment and then takes it out and it becomes leprous and then puts it back in again and it's healed. There is a leprosy that's clinging to the nation of Egypt. A leprosy that the sixth plague reveals, brings to light.

At the end of the third plague, the Egyptian magicians recognised that they were dealing with the finger of God. They could not replicate the signs performed by Aaron. And here they're knocked out more decisively.

They're defiled by the skin disease. They can't stand before Pharaoh anymore. They're overcome completely.

But yet God strengthens Pharaoh's heart at this point. Now what does this mean that God strengthens Pharaoh's heart? The language is different from God hardening Pharaoh's heart or Pharaoh hardening his own heart. The language of hardening suggests the stubbornness and the obstinacy of Pharaoh.

He will not respond to God. No matter what God throws at him he resists. But strengthening suggests something different.

Strengthening suggests the emboldening of Pharaoh's heart. What God seems to be doing here is giving Pharaoh the power to resist. God is not just going to steamroll a Pharaoh.

He could do that. He could just crush Pharaoh with his might. But by strengthening the heart of Pharaoh God is determined to win by principle not just by power.

God could win by power. He could use his power to strike terror, fear and awe into the heart of Pharaoh. So Pharaoh would just give up and surrender and put up his hands.

He's faced with a greater power. He can't do anything. But by emboldening the heart of Pharaoh God ensures that Pharaoh won't just give up.

Pharaoh will have to admit his place relative to God. He won't just submit out of fear and defeat. But he will submit as he recognises who God is.

The seventh plague is the start of the third cycle of plagues. And once again it happens first thing in the morning. This time God is going to send the plague more directly himself.

God declares that he has raised Pharaoh up for a purpose. So that his own power and name might be proclaimed in all of the earth. God could have taken the Israelites out of Egypt without any trouble.

He could have whisked them away. He could have used darkness for instance and just allowed the people to escape under cover of night. He could have completely devastated the Egyptians instantaneously.

But he didn't do any of those things. It is essential that we see that the exodus, more than the matter of delivering Israel from Egypt, more than the matter of judging the Egyptians for their sins, is about God demonstrating who he is. And the fact that there

are a series of plagues, plagues that strike at different parts of the life and the world of Egypt, shows God's power in each one of the realms that would be attributed to different gods of the Egyptians.

This time something else happens that hasn't happened before. There's a warning given and a chance to repent. Whoever fears the word of the Lord has the chance to deliver themselves.

Note the fear of the word of the Lord, not just his destructive might. Any person can fear the plague when it hits. But those who fear the word of the Lord will remove their animals and their slaves before it hits.

The second cycle of plagues begins a distinction between the Egyptians and the Israelites, the land of Goshen and the rest of Egypt. And the third cycle begins a distinction between God-fearing Egyptians and others within the land of Egypt, and those who resist the Lord, Pharaoh and his servants who align with him. Moses stretches out his hand, holding his staff towards heaven.

And the plague involves thunder, fire and hail all together. This is a massive and terrible electrical storm. And the combination is probably a significant sign of God's power to wield these elements in concert with each other.

God is not, like most of the gods of the Egyptians, a god of just one particular element, one particular part of the cosmos. This is a god who is in control of all these different parts of the world. And he can use them one after another in succession, but also at the same time.

This is a sign of God's power over the creation that he has created. And after this plague, Pharaoh seems to confess his fault. But his admission again is shallow, and he hardens his heart once more.

As Moses recognises when he speaks to him, Pharaoh and his servants still do not fear the Lord. This judgement occurred at the time of the flax and the barley, so it was likely in the first week of February. Some scholars have observed that the order of the plagues does not seem to be arbitrary.

Rather, we can think of a causal chain that connects them. Now this is not to deny that God is in control of the entire causal chain. Indeed, that's the precise point.

Nor is it intended to reduce all of these things to natural causation. There are some plagues, such as the plague on the firstborn, which cannot be explained in this way. The point, rather, is to show the manner of God's work within his creation.

Even miracles can use the natural means and causes of the creation itself. So the suggestion that some have given is that it starts off with heavy rain at the source of the

Nile. And that pollutes the river with red earth, which gives it its red colour.

It turns to blood. But in association with the picking up of this red earth, there's this explosion of flagellates. And those flagellates cause the water to become smelly, they deoxygenate the water, causing fish to die, and the place just becomes disgusting.

And then, as a result of this water going all over the land, as there's been an especially pronounced flooding season, sources of water that people would formerly have depended upon have all become polluted, and they have to dig new wells. As a result of this, the habitat of the frogs is fouled up by the dead fish, and the frogs leave it and go into human residences and elsewhere. But they become infected by anthrax, and after they take refuge in man-made places, they end up suddenly dying.

At this point, the Nile subsides, and that leaves all these stagnant pools. And within those pools, there's a proliferation of mosquitoes. Now this is taking us from August to about September or October.

At that point, there is this breeding of horseflies, and they are breeding rapidly in the decaying vegetation that has been left behind by the flooding of the River Nile. They don't breed in the land of Goshen because the conditions aren't right for them. They die, possibly because they've been infected by the anthrax.

And then the cattle go out to pasture as the flood recedes, as the Egyptians would usually put their cattle out at that point. But they're eating from ground that has been infested by anthrax, by the dead frogs, and they end up dying as a result. At this point, flies that have picked up anthrax spores from the cattle and elsewhere, they bite animals and human beings, and they infect the human beings, producing this skin condition.

By this point, we arrive at the events of the hailstorm, and that comes in early February or late January. This has been a series of blows upon Egypt, starting at about the time of August, and it will go all the way through to April. It moves from severe irritation to disaster, to utterly devastating calamity.

It is as if God has set up this vast Rube Goldberg machine of judgement. The sin of Pharaoh and the Egyptians has set it in motion, and until they repent, things are not going to be stopped. A question to consider.

The plagues are a revelation of God's power, of the character of God's power. By this point in the story, what have we learnt about the character of God's power, and the way that it contrasts with the power of the false gods? Matthew chapter 13, verses 24-43. He put another parable before them, saying, The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field.

But while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared

also. And the servants of the master of the house came and said to him, Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have weeds? He said to them, An enemy has done this.

So the servants said to him, Then do you want us to go and gather them? But he said, No, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. Let both grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn. He put another parable before them, saying, The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field.

It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches. He told them another parable, The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour till it was all leavened. All these things Jesus said to the crowds in parables.

Indeed, he said nothing to them without a parable. This was to fulfil what was spoken by the prophet, I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter what has been hidden since the foundation of the world. Then he left the crowds and went into the house, and his disciples came to him, saying, Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field.

He answered, The one who sows the good seed is the son of man, the field is the world, and the good seed is the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels.

Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The son of man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all lawbreakers, and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their father. He who has ears, let him hear. Matthew 13 involves three cycles of parables, and in the centre section we have the parable of the wheat and the tares as the core parable.

There are common assumptions that these parables are timeless moral fables, or perhaps illustrations of what is true for people in the age of the church. But Jesus is speaking as one fulfilling the prophets, one in the line of the prophets, bringing their missions to a climax. And it's very difficult to understand what he's saying without taking that into account.

The parables are primarily speaking to a first century context, to Israel's experience and situation. Once again the parables here are about sowing and growing. The parable of



the wheat and the tares is a parable also about harvest.

Jesus has already spoken about the harvest at the end of chapter 9. Then he said to his disciples, the harvest is plentiful but the labourers are few. Therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest. And those themes of harvest are ones that continue throughout the chapters that follow.

Jesus and his kingdom are initiating a time of division, of judgement, and Israel needs to be prepared for this. They're going to have to be judged as a result of how they received Jesus himself and his messengers. We often think of Jesus as standing at the beginning of the parables, the one who sets things in motion that will continue for the period of the church age, finally coming to their conclusion in the second coming.

But in most of the parables the stories are coming to their climax in Christ. Christ is the one who completes the ministry of the prophets. He's the one who comes as the son after the servants have been cruelly treated.

In the context of these parables Jesus refers to Psalm 78, the opening verses of that. That psalm is a retelling of Israel's history, a telling of Israel's history as one of constant failure and rebellion and disobedience, leading up to the establishment of David as king. Jesus is revealing the hidden truth of Israel's history in his teaching.

He's telling Israel's history in the form of these parables. Now the seed is sown in the world, not just the land. I believe the seed being spoken of here is the diaspora, the scattering of Israel among the nations.

The very etymology of the word diaspora involves the notion of sowing. Israel is sown among the nations so that they might grow in these different parts of the world. Now we often think about the scattering of Israel purely in terms of judgment, but it wasn't just judgment.

We can see in many cases that the Israelites were having influence, that they were gaining prominence and power and speaking for God in various parts of the world. However, as faithful Israelites were growing up throughout the known world, so were unfaithful ones. It wasn't just Daniels and Esthers and figures like that.

It was also unfaithful people, people who were causing trouble and causing the Gentiles to blaspheme the name of God. Both seem to be thriving together, and prophets and angels might ask God, why isn't he separating them? Why isn't he removing these tares? However, now the field is white for harvest, and the division is about to take place. The cities that Jesus and his disciples go through are being prepared to stand in the judgment, and it will be worse for those that reject Christ and his disciples than cities such as Sodom and Gomorrah or Tyre and Sidon.

The kingdom then is bringing about a sifting process, the initiation of a process of

separation. In the parable of the mustard seed that follows, Jesus is once again working with Old Testament background and talking about the story of Israel. More particularly, he's working with the parable of Ezekiel in Ezekiel chapter 17.

In that parable, there are two eagles representing Babylon and the Egyptians. The Babylonian eagle snaps off part of this cedar tree, its topmost of its young twigs, and carries it to a land of trade, sets it in a city of merchants, places it beside abundant waters, and it starts to sprout and become a low-spreading vine. Its branches turn towards it, and it becomes a prosperous vine.

There is then another eagle that comes along, representing Egypt, and that eagle causes the vine to move towards it, and the vine withers as it does so. God then declares that at the end, I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of the cedar and will set it out. I will break off from the topmost of its young twigs, a tender one, and I myself will plant it on a high and lofty mountain.

On the mountain height of Israel will I plant it, that it may bear branches and produce fruit and become a noble cedar, and under it will dwell every kind of bird. In the shade of its branches birds of every sort will nest, and all of the trees of the field shall know that I am the Lord. I bring low the high tree and make high the low tree, dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish.

I am the Lord, I have spoken, and I will do it. Within that parable of Ezekiel we have many of the same themes. We have the idea of sowing, we have the idea of this tree that becomes great and prospers, and this tree compared with all the other trees.

We have the elements of the birds coming to take rest in its branches and shade beneath it. Similar language is also found in the book of Daniel in reference to Nebuchadnezzar. The tree is a symbol of a powerful empire or a ruler, one that provides refuge and strength for others.

Nebuchadnezzar is symbolised in the vision. The tree grew and became strong and its top reached to heaven, and it was visible to the end of the whole earth. Its leaves were beautiful and its fruit abundant, and in it was food for all.

The beasts of the field found shade under it, and the birds of the heavens lived in its branches, and all flesh was fed from it. That tree will later be lopped down as God judges Nebuchadnezzar, but the symbolism is there again. Further symbolism that might be in the background of this particular parable is found just two chapters earlier in the book of Daniel, where the stone that comes down grows into a mountain that fills the whole earth.

Now while Jesus is using the background of Ezekiel, he does not mention a cedar tree. Rather he talks about a mustard seed, and a mustard seed that eventually grows into a

tree and becomes larger than all the garden plants, and the birds of the air come and make their nests in its branches. It's this great tree that stands out from the other trees.

It's a very strange way to describe it, particularly since it defies all botanical reality. But that's because this isn't an illustration taken from nature. It's playing off against the image of the cedar.

The cedars like Babylon or the Romans or the Greeks stand out on this horizon. They're these vast trees, and yet Israel seems like this small, measly bush. It's a mustard bush.

It's not actually a tree at all. But yet what Jesus is saying is that it is a tree. It's a great tree, great among all the other trees.

And it is actually the central tree. It isn't great by nature. It has the smallest seed of all.

Also, not just the smallest seed of all, but naturally it just becomes a bush. But yet in God's kingdom, it is that great tree. It is the one that fulfills all these promises of this mountain that will fill the earth, of this tree that will give rest to birds in its branches.

What is happening with the mustard seed is not natural. But it is a sign of God's power and God's involvement. God is going to establish His kingdom through a mustard seed, not through the great cedars of the world.

The parable of the leaven that follows works with very similar themes. The leaven, which isn't the same as yeast, it's more like sourdough, is hidden in three measures of flour. Israel, as it's scattered throughout the world, as it's hidden among these different measures of flour, causes the nations to rise up, like yeast has that effect in flour.

Israel has been hidden among the nations by God, and this is part of God's purpose. It is part of the means by which the kingdom is established. When Paul and others go on their missionary journeys throughout the world, everywhere they go, pretty much, there are synagogues.

There are faithful Jews who are prepared to hear the message of the Gospel. This is part of how the early church develops. Maybe this is what's being referred to.

But this isn't a dramatic process. It's a gradual process. It isn't glorious.

It uses leaven. Leaven is something that has a lot of negative connotations in Scripture. It might be seen as unclean.

But yet, this is the means by which God works, not in a glorious, dramatic way, not through this great establishment of a kingdom on the front stage, but in very silent, hidden, imperceptible ways. The work of the kingdom is going on in these different places. The parables of the mustard seed and of the leaven are twin parables.

And as we look through the Gospels, we'll see several sets of twin parables, or even triplet parables. And these can be more readily understood when they're related to each other. They're seldom identical twins, though.

The point is not just to repeat what has already been said using a different illustration. It's not what's going on. Rather, they represent different aspects of Israel's ministry in relationship to the nations.

The parable of the mustard seed highlights the smallness of Israel relative to the nations. The parable of the leaven represents the hiddenness of the work of the kingdom that's being carried out through them. Hiddenness is an important theme in these places.

The work of the kingdom is marked by insignificant and inglorious origins. Note that in the twinning, one parable involves a man sowing seed, and its counterpart involves a woman hiding leaven. Both involve an intentional action towards a goal with significant results, but imperceptible processes.

And the fact that one involves a man and the other involves a woman suggests to me that we're supposed to see a marriage here. Not a literal marriage between the two characters of the parables, but the parables themselves are, as it were, a married pair. And as you read them together, you'll understand them in ways that you would not if you read them separately.

Matthew says that Jesus speaks in parables to fulfil the words found near the beginning of Psalm 78, which, as I've mentioned already, recounts Israel's history leading up to the establishment of the kingdom of David. And as the son of David, he's doing the same thing in relationship to his own kingdom. Our section ends with Jesus explaining the parable of the weeds, or the parable of the wheat and the tares.

And he does so by referring to a final judgment that's happening at the end of the age. I believe as we go through the book of Matthew, it will become clear that the judgment in view is not the final judgment at the end of all things, but it's the judgment that's approaching at the end of that age, at the end of the age of the old covenant. As AD 70 and the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem leads to the final hammer blow upon those who rejected Christ's ministry and that of his church.

A question to consider. The teaching of the parables is not exclusive to the situation of Israel in the first century and its identity. Rather, they speak to patterns of divine activity and work throughout history.

How can we see in these parables the experience of the church?