

# OpenTheo

## March 1st: Exodus 8 & Matthew 13:1-23

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Plagues of frogs, lice/gnats, and swarms. The Parable of the Sower and teaching in parables.

Some passages referenced:

Exodus 1:7 (Israel teeming and filling the land); Exodus 5:21 (Israel stinking); Exodus 7:18, 21 (the Nile stinking); Exodus 14:30 (piles of dead bodies beside the waters); Psalm 78:45 (the plague of swarms); Exodus 10:19 (not one of the locusts remained); Exodus 14:28 (not one of the Egyptians remained).

Hosea 2:21-23, Isaiah 55:10-13, Jeremiah 31:27-28 (God sowing his people); Hebrews 6:7-8 (the fate of land rejecting all cultivation); Isaiah 6:9-13 (the primary Old Testament intertext).

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

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## Transcript

Exodus Chapter 8 Then the Lord said to Moses, Go in to Pharaoh and say to him, Thus says the Lord, Let my people go, that they may serve me. But if you refuse to let them

go, behold, I will plague all your country with frogs. The Nile shall swarm with frogs that shall come up into your house and into your bedroom, and on your bed and into the houses of your servants and your people, and into your ovens and your kneading bowls.

The frog shall come up on you, and on your people, and on all your servants.' And the Lord said to Moses, Say to Aaron, Stretch out your hand with your staff over the rivers, over the canals, and over the pools, and make frogs come up on the land of Egypt. So Aaron stretched out his hand over the waters of Egypt, and the frogs came up and covered the land of Egypt. But the magicians did the same by their secret arts, and made frogs come up on the land of Egypt.

Then Pharaoh called Moses and Aaron and said, Plead with the Lord to take away the frogs from me and from my people, and I will let the people go to sacrifice to the Lord. Moses said to Pharaoh, Be pleased to command me when I am to plead for you and for your servants and for your people, that the frogs be cut off from you and your houses, and be left only in the Nile. And he said, Tomorrow.

Moses said, Be it as you say, so that you may know that there is no one like the Lord our God. The frogs shall go away from you and your houses and your servants and your people. They shall be left only in the Nile.

So Moses and Aaron went out from Pharaoh, and Moses cried to the Lord about the frogs as he had agreed with Pharaoh. And the Lord did according to the word of Moses. The frogs died out in the houses, the courtyards, and the fields, and they gathered them together in heaps, and the land stank.

But when Pharaoh saw that there was a respite, he hardened his heart, and would not listen to them, as the Lord had said. Then the Lord said to Moses, Say to Aaron, Stretch out your staff and strike the dust of the earth, so that it may become gnats in all the land of Egypt. And they did so.

Aaron stretched out his hand with his staff and struck the dust of the earth, and there were gnats on man and beast. All the dust of the earth became gnats in all the land of Egypt. The magicians tried by their secret arts to produce gnats, but they could not.

So there were gnats on man and beast. Then the magicians said to Pharaoh, This is the finger of God. But Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he would not listen to them, as the Lord had said.

Then the Lord said to Moses, Rise up early in the morning and present yourself to Pharaoh as he goes out to the water, and say to him, Thus says the Lord, Let my people go, that they may serve me. 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.

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, that you may know that I am the Lord in the midst of the earth. Thus I will put a division between my people and your people. Tomorrow this sign shall happen.

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.

Then Pharaoh called Moses and Aaron and said, Go, sacrifice to your God within the land. 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? We must go three days' journey into the wilderness and sacrifice to the Lord our God as he tells us.

So Pharaoh said, 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. 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. So Moses went out from Pharaoh and prayed to the Lord. 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. But Pharaoh hardened his heart this time also and did not let the people go. In Exodus chapter 8 we move on to plagues 2-4.

We should remind ourselves at this point of the pattern of the plagues. There are three sets of three plagues with a great capstone plague, the slaying of the firstborn. The plagues gradually move from the Nile upwards.

They move from discomfort to more direct attacks upon property and flesh to judgment from the heavens. The first cycle has Aaron squaring off against the magicians of Pharaoh. The second cycle is very much Moses versus Pharaoh.

And the third cycle is God against the false gods. And there is an internal pattern to each cycle. In plagues 1, 4 and 7, the first in each sequence, they occur in the morning and Moses meets with Pharaoh as he comes out of the river.

In plagues 2, 5 and 8, the second in the sequence, he comes to Pharaoh to warn him, presumably during the day. And then in the final plague of each sequence, there is no warning or opportunity to change course. It is as it were the evening plague.

The first plague was the turning of the river and the various waters into blood. And the second plague, the plague of frogs, originates in the river and comes out to the land. There is a natural progression here.

The water has been polluted and now things from the water come onto the land and pollute the land. We are told that the Nile swarms or teems with frogs. And this language is only used on one other occasion in the book of Exodus.

In chapter 1 verse 7, the people of Israel were fruitful and increased greatly. They multiplied and grew exceedingly strong so that the land was filled with them. Israel teems and fills the entire land of Egypt.

Now the frogs will come up from the Nile and do the same. If the turning of the water into blood recalled the infanticide that the Nile had covered up, in the plague of frogs it is as if the teeming people who were drowned are coming up and covering the land once more. God speaks to Moses at this point who has to tell Aaron to stretch out his rod.

Once again, Aaron seems to be the main actor while the magicians are still in play as he is their counterpart. They are the pawns on the board and they need to be removed by the time that God deals with the people on the back row, the gods of Egypt and Pharaoh himself. Pharaoh has to request the removal of the frogs.

We can note the parallels between Israel and the frogs again. If Israel teems like the frogs and fills the land like the frogs, the Lord is telling Pharaoh to let his people go but he is also symbolically representing his people's presence in the land in the form of plagues from which Pharaoh must ask for relief. There is an ironic character to all of this.

God is presenting his people as if a plague upon the land. You can also think about the way that the frogs would be associated with the Egyptian deity of fertility, Hecate. This goddess was also associated with midwifery.

This raises the possibility that the frogs don't just represent the Hebrew infants who were drowned within the river that has turned to blood but that there is also some retribution for the role that Pharaoh tried to get the midwives to play in the crime. One of the immediate outcomes of the plague of the frogs is a defiling of the land. The frogs, as their dead bodies are piled up, cause a stink in the land.

Notice that this term has already been used in reference to Israel itself back in chapter 5 verse 21. The Lord look on you and judge because you have made us stink in the sight of Pharaoh and his servants. And then the Nile is caused to stink in chapter 7 verses 18 and 21.

There are piles of stinking dead bodies beside the waters. This might make us think further on down the line in chapter 14 verse 30 the dead bodies of the Egyptians themselves are piled up. Maybe that comes into view as well.

Moses' request for the timing of the plague's removal is interesting, particularly in Pharaoh's response. Pharaoh asks, not as you would expect, remove them right away. Get rid of the frogs as soon as you possibly can.

No, he says, tomorrow. Why tomorrow? Well in part because any God can perform some great act of power, throwing the muscle of deity around and making some big effect within the world. Any deity can do that.

But something more is at play when we see a God acting with such precision. Not just throwing great power around, but acting with great precision. And so asking for the frogs to be removed the next day tests the precision of God.

Is God just a deity throwing his weight around? Or is God a deity who is able to control things truly? Pharaoh initially relents and agrees to let the people go to sacrifice to the Lord, but then he hardens his heart when there is some relief. Following this there is a third plague, and this third plague is a sort of spreading of the rot. In the first two plagues Aaron stretched out his rod over the rivers and canals and pools of Egypt, but in the third he strikes the dust.

The waters were turned to blood. Now the dust comes alive. It turns into gnats or mosquitoes or lice.

We're not entirely sure what these things are. We might also see a natural progression here. The dead bodies of the frogs have been piled up and within those dead bodies the larvae of mosquitoes and other creatures have been developing and now those come and cause a problem.

The dust is associated with the curse and the third plague leads to the curse coming up from the ground. The topsoil becomes alive and then there's this covering of people. The third plague, which is the final in the first cycle of plagues, leads to the climactic event of the defeat of the magicians.

They realise that they are dealing with the finger of God. This is not just human trickery or some sleight of hand. There is something here that cannot be replicated by human arts and skills.

This is the finger of God himself and yet Pharaoh strengthens his heart. Now it's important to notice the difference between the ways in which Pharaoh's heart is said to respond. At certain points it is said that he hardens his heart or that God hardens his heart.

At other points he strengthens his heart or God strengthens his heart. These seem to be different things although there is a relationship between them of course. When he strengthens his heart there's a sort of emboldening of his heart.

He takes new added courage and spirit and he's able to stand up and be even more resistant. The hardening is a lack of responsiveness. This closing down, this making the heart dull and heavy and these are slightly different things.

As God strengthens the heart of Pharaoh we can see that God is giving him the spirit to resist. He's giving him the strength by which he can rise up and resist God. Not just dulling his heart but giving him a greater power in which to pit himself against God.

The fourth plague which comes next follows the same pattern of three. So it begins with the morning as Pharaoh is coming out of the water. Will be followed by a plague in which Moses presents himself to Pharaoh during the day and then finally a plague that comes without warning later on.

Aaron is no longer so prominent within these plagues. In the previous three he was squaring off against the Egyptian magicians but now they've been taken out of the fight for the most part. So now it's Moses primarily in conversation with Pharaoh.

There's also an added dimension at this point in that God makes a distinction between the Egyptians and his people. Formerly it seems that all came under judgment but God in preparation for taking his people out is gradually separating and distinguishing the people of Israel from the Egyptians. In the swarms of flies or beetles or whatever the creatures are here it's as if the previous plague may be coming more airborne.

That's one possibility. We're not entirely sure what either of these creatures are exactly so it's not entirely certain how they relate to each other. In Psalm 78 verse 45 they seem to be biting insects.

Insects or creatures that feed upon the Egyptians. They also seem to be clinging to the Egyptians and their dwellings to a greater degree. It's not just upon the land and creatures in general.

It's like a natural guided missile that these things are following the Egyptians around. They're going into their houses. They're causing problems that are very clearly targeted upon the Egyptians.

There's a greater precision here. A more targeted character to this particular judgment. This is followed by further negotiations between Pharaoh Moses and Aaron.

They insist that they must sacrifice at three days journey according to God's command. And when there is some agreement reached we're told that not one of the swarms remained. This is an expression that's also found in chapter 10 verse 19 in reference to the locusts.

But also interestingly in chapter 14 verse 28 in reference to the Egyptians themselves that as a result of the judgment of the Red Sea not one of them remains. Seeing the sort

of associations that we've noted between the Israelites and the creatures of the plagues but also with the Egyptians and the creatures of the plagues we can see maybe that there's something deeper going on here. These are signs.

They're symbols of what God is doing. They're symbols of judgment but also a possibility how if you respond you can avoid these fates that await you. That these fates that are initially just external discomforts and become more and more intimate and more and more directed that if you respond in time you will be able to avert the fate that awaits you.

However once again Pharaoh proves untrustworthy and won't let them go. A question to consider. The story of the plagues is in many ways a story that teaches us a lot about sin and the way that God brings sin to our attention.

We see the way in which people are reminded of the crime by the water being turned to blood. The way that the crime becomes a discomfort in the plague of the frogs. And then how the sin becomes more and more in their face and unavoidable.

In the process God is bringing this sin to a reckoning and he's also preparing the people to recognize the true character of the sin. The judgments bring to light the character of what has been done. What are some of the ways that you see that these passages shed light upon our understanding of sin and the way that God brings it to the surface in our own lives and societies and how we should respond as he does so.

Matthew chapter 13 verses 1 to 23. Psalm 30. He who has ears let him hear.

Then the disciples came and said to him why do you speak to them in parables? And he answered them to you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven but to them it has not been given for to the one who has more will be given and he will have an abundance but from the one who has not even what he has will be taken away. This is why I speak to them in parables because seeing they do not see and hearing they do not hear nor do they understand. Indeed in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled that says you will indeed hear but never understand you will indeed see but never perceive for this people's heart has grown dull and with their ears they can barely hear and their eyes they have closed lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn and I would heal them but blessed are your eyes for they see and your ears for they hear for truly I say to you many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see and did not see it and to hear what you hear and did not hear it.

Hear then the parable of the sower when anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is what was sown along the path as for what was sown on rocky ground this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy yet he has no root in

himself but endures for a while and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word immediately he falls away. As for what was sown among thorns this is the one who hears the word but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word and it proves unfruitful.

As for what was sown on good soil this is the one who hears the word and understands it he indeed bears fruit and yields in one case a hundredfold in another 60 and in another 30. At the beginning of Matthew 13 Jesus leaves the house and sits down beside the sea. At this point a crowd is gathered or more literally synagogued to Jesus and Jesus goes out into a boat sits down and teaches from there while the crowd is on the beach.

The setting here is probably significant in the gospels the sea plays an important symbolic role it's associated with the realm of the gentiles and the world beyond Israel and a boat is a part of the land taken out to sea. Maybe we're supposed to pay attention to this particular detail that's mentioned in other gospels as well. Jesus teaches the people in parables and many people are unclear about the sort of thing that parables are.

Many believe that they are illustrations something that helps understanding and maybe presents a particular concept in a more vivid form. Others see them as moral fables with some timeless lesson but neither of these things are correct. The parables are parables of the kingdom of God something that is dawning in history at a critical moment and they're things that explain and disclose but they're also things that bring about changes.

Something new is happening in history and the parables disclose this. The parables themselves are a means by which the kingdom is simultaneously revealed and concealed. The parables are riddles that expose the mystery of the kingdom to those with the eyes to see and ears to hear but they're also things that conceal them to those who do not.

Great mysteries are being revealed to those who are able to perceive and those who have hard hearts and dull ears are unable to see anything. The parable closes it off to them and so they're performing this double function. At the same time they're opening things up to some people and they're closing things off to others.

We find examples of parables at a few points in the Old Testament. They can function as riddles or prophetic messages and here they let people in on the secret of the kingdom of God of what God is doing in Israel's history at this time. They take familiar stories and patterns and images from the Old Testament and reorder them often yielding greater illumination but also sometimes surprising epiphanies and shocks.

This is not the way that people were expecting the story to go. While many think that the parable of the sower is obvious, Jesus himself explains it, it isn't necessarily so. There's more going on here and it pays to be attentive to the details.



For many it's a timeless pattern of hearing and the relationship between hearing the word and being saved. It's an illustration of our doctrines of salvation, maybe helping us to understand the doctrine of regeneration and its relationship with the word of God. But while those doctrines may be true in their own place, I don't believe that that's primarily what's taking place here.

The primary place to go for understanding is the Old Testament itself. That's where we first find parables, it's where we find much of the imagery of the parables and if we pay attention to Old Testament prophecy and wisdom literature many of these things will be a bit more apparent to us than they would be otherwise. The seed I believe is the word of God that re-establishes the people after exile.

In the book of Isaiah chapter 55 verses 10 to 13 we read, for as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth. It shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it. For you shall go out in joy and be led forth in peace.

The mountains and the hills before you shall break forth into singing and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress, instead of the briar shall come up the myrtle, and it shall make a name for the Lord, an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off. Similar themes are found in the book of Jeremiah chapter 31 verse 27 and 28.

Behold the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the seed of man and the seed of beast, and it shall come to pass that as I have watched over them to pluck up and break down, to overthrow, destroy and bring harm, so I will watch over them to build and to plant, declares the Lord. God is sowing the word that will restore his people, but it isn't being properly received. Indeed much of the seed will be wasted and remain in its exile-like conditions.

And the telling of the parable has something of the effect that it is describing. Those who recognise its meaning can perceive that God is finally bringing about the fulfilment of his promises in Christ. He is sowing his word, he's restoring his people.

But the climax of the story won't necessarily look the way that people expected it to. In the climax Jesus experiences the negative responses that previous prophets had received, not just the positive response of fruitfulness expected. You have both of those things alongside each other.

We find the imagery of failed ground elsewhere in the New Testament, for instance in Hebrews chapter 6 verses 7 and 8. For land that has drunk the rain that often falls on it and produces a crop useful to those for whose sake it is cultivated, receives a blessing

from God. But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed and its end is to be burned. In that context I believe he's referring to the Israelites who rejected the word of God, which is the same thing as Christ is referring to.

These are people that had received all the blessings, had received the sowing of the word of God and yet had not produced fruit. They had failed in that respect and they were being prepared for being burned as a result. They were suffering judgment in that generation.

The same imagery of sower and seed is found elsewhere in literature of the same sort of period. We find it in 4 Ezra for instance, chapter 8 41 following. For just as the farmer sows many seeds in the ground and plants a multitude of seedlings and yet not all that have been sown will come up in due season and not all that were planted will take root, so also those who have been sown in the world will not all be saved.

And then 4 Ezra 9 30 following. Hear me O Israel for I sow my law in you and it shall bring forth fruit in you and you shall be glorified through it forever. But though our ancestors received the law, they did not keep it and did not observe the statutes.

Yet the fruit of the law did not perish for it could not because it was yours. Yet those who received it perished because they did not keep what had been sown in them. Jesus seems to use the imagery of the seed and the sower in a very similar way.

The parable of the sower is especially important because in many respects it is the parable about parables. It is in the context of this parable that Jesus teaches concerning his use of parables more generally. It is also arguably the first of the parables and like many of the other parables it is a parable about growth.

We will find it very difficult to understand the parable of the sower unless we see it against the backdrop of the verses that Jesus quotes from Isaiah chapter 6. The point of Jesus' use of Isaiah chapter 6 is not just to explain non-response but to provoke faithful response. Jesus is giving this word of judgment that Isaiah has at the beginning of his ministry to provoke people who hear that not to be like that. Jesus draws a strong comparison between his ministry and that of Isaiah and this is a comparison that is quite pronounced in a number of the Gospels.

For instance it is developed all the way through Luke leading up to the climax of Acts chapter 28 where that verse is brought forward again in verses 25 to 28. The Holy Spirit was right in saying to your fathers through Isaiah the prophet, go to this people and say you will indeed hear but never understand and you will indeed see but never perceive for this people's heart has grown dull and with their ears they can barely hear and their eyes they have closed lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn and I'll heal them. Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles.

They will listen. This is the very end of the book of Acts. It's a programmatic statement for Acts and for the book of Luke.

It helps to address the question with which the book of Acts begins. Are you going to restore the kingdom to Israel at this time? As a more general principle of interpretation it's important when we hear an Old Testament passage quoted, referenced or alluded to, to consider the context that it originally comes from and the latter part of Isaiah chapter 6 is all about hearing and not hearing and it ends on a key note about the remnant as the holy seed. It's by God's sowing of his word and the hearing of that word that the promised remnant is planted and Isaiah brings those themes together and we won't understand the melody as it were of Matthew chapter 13 unless we hear it alongside the harmony of Isaiah chapter 6. Those two things played together bring to life what's taking place here.

The verses after the verses Jesus quotes read, So Jesus is comparing his ministry to previous ministries of prophets such as Isaiah but he's also presenting himself as the one who is sowing the seed of the restoration, the seed of the remnant that will restore God's people as the prophets had all promised. In Hosea chapter 2 verse 21 to 23 for instance we read, Jesus' statement to his disciples in verses 16 and 17 make clear that this is something happening at the fullness of time. It's not just a timeless message about how people respond or don't respond to the word of God.

But now in the fullness of time God is restoring his people by sowing his word. He's speaking and in his speech he is restoring his word. The parable is as I've said a parable about parables, a parable about the teaching of the kingdom more generally.

It's a statement of purpose. The promised kingdom of God is not as many kingdoms are, a kingdom of military might and power, a kingdom of political intrigue and skill. It's a kingdom of the word.

It's a kingdom formed by the speaking of God to his people, a word that gives life. It's a kingdom calling for wise and transformed perspectives, people changing the way that they see the world, God's action within it and their place within it. And it's working is not immediately obvious.

It's the sowing of a seed, a seed of a word and that word finding root or not finding root and the way that it responds or doesn't respond and that is how the work of the kingdom is taking place. This is not what we would usually think of as a kingdom but here Christ is describing a kingdom that does not match our expectations, that surprises us and this fundamental surprise prepares us for much that will follow. Jesus' interpretation of the parable with which our passage ends highlights different problems behind the non-reception of the seed.

Satan can stop people's understanding. This is the condition that Isaiah describes,

people whose hearts have become hard. They can't hear with their ears or see with their eyes.

They've become dulled in their perception. For other people, they fail to persevere through testing. They face the hard situation of being pushed to the limit and they realize that they're going to be ostracized, they're going to lose their livelihoods, they're going to be pursued or maybe their lives will be taken and faced with those prospects, they give up.

They do not persevere through the testing. For others, it's being led astray by the concerns of the present age. The deceitfulness of riches, a very powerful way of describing how riches can operate.

Jesus has talked about riches elsewhere in the Sermon on the Mount for instance and spoken about how important it is to relate to riches well if we are going to enter the kingdom of God. Reading this parable in its proper context is incredibly important. It's important to see that Christ is declaring something that's happening in the fullness of time through his ministry.

God is establishing a new people and he's establishing this new people by his word and there are all these obstacles to receiving this word, this word of restoration. It can be seen in the way that Satan will dull people's understanding or snatch the word away from their hearts. It can be seen in the way that the cares and concerns of the world, the wealth that we have and the way that we become preoccupied with it, the way in which we can face persecution and just not stand up to it.

All of these things are obstacles and so people are forearmed against these dangers. This word that Jesus is giving here is part of the sowing that it describes. The parable of the sower is itself a sowing of the word in the hearts of people so that they will respond as they ought.

As they see the different ways that they could respond in an inappropriate way, they are being called to be those who bring forth fruit. Again, the distinction is not found in the reception of the word itself. Some ground receives the word and yet does not produce proper fruit.

The distinguishing feature of the proper reception is the bringing forth of fruit. There is something that must be transformed in people's lives. It must be something that reveals this new character of the kingdom that has been sown in their hearts, in their lives, in their communities.

A question to consider. Parables are, as it were, riddles of the kingdom and throughout this particular passage there's an emphasis upon hearing and understanding. We have this repeated expression, for instance, he who has ears let him hear.

Blessed are your ears for they hear. And then hear the parable of the sower. And then Jesus' conclusion of the interpretation, as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it.

This emphasis upon hearing is not just found in Jesus' words. It's also seen in the words of Isaiah the prophet. Taking this great emphasis upon hearing, that is at the very beginning of Jesus' teaching in these parables, how might our more typical understandings of hearing be challenged and changed by what Jesus is teaching concerning hearing here?