

“Just Who is the Lord Of the Flies?”

By Steve Ramer, Pastor

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Scripture

Exodus 8

Then the Lord said to Moses, “Rise early in the morning and present yourself before Pharaoh... and say to him, ‘...Let my people go... For if you will not let my people go, I will send swarms of flies on you, your officials, and your people, and into your houses; and the houses of the Egyptians shall be filled with swarms of flies... The Lord did so, and great swarms of flies came into the house of Pharaoh and into his officials' houses; in all of Egypt the land was ruined because of the flies.

Then Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron, and said, “Go... So Moses went out from Pharaoh and prayed to the Lord. And the Lord did as Moses asked: he removed the swarms of flies... But Pharaoh hardened his heart this time also, and would not let the people go.

Matthew 23:27-28 “You, scholars and Pharisees, you impostors! Damn you! For you are like whitewashed tombs: on the outside they look beautiful, but inside they are full of dead bones and every kind of decay. So you too look like decent people on the outside, but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and subverting the law of God.

Sermon

I’m just curious, but how many of you watched the VP debate last Wednesday night?

Not too many huh?

Well that isn’t surprising since VP Debates have negligible impact on the outcome of Presidential elections.

Most are forgettable events with only a few exceptions. But there have been some memorable moments that have managed to remain etched within our common memory.

Such as Mike Dukakis’ running mate, Lloyd Bentsen’s now famous retort to a baby-faced Dan Quayle, “Senator you’re no Jack Kennedy!” when Dan compared himself to President John F. Kennedy.

Or Ross Perot’s running mate, and Vietnam war hero, Admiral James Stockdale, who mumbled loudly at one point, “Who am I?” “Why am I here?”

Wednesday night’s debate will likely find a similar place in history. But not for what was said but for what happened, as one reporter described it, *“We all had a good laugh about the audacious fly that crawled around on Mike Pence’s sensible haircut during Wednesday night’s debate...”*

And indeed, many commentators that night, as well as in many memes since, a great deal of laughter has ensued due to that small critter's debut.

But one commentator afterwards made a perhaps more solemn allusion that the fly may have been attracted to VP Pence due the "almost lifeless" performance that he gave.

But that same journalist quoted above also asks an even more provocative, if not cheeky question, *"but were we actually seeing a demonic manifestation before our very eyes?"*

This question first got legs when a anti-Trump republican commentator with a straight face said in a televised interview, *"I don't think it's ever a good sign when a fly lands on your head for two minutes. That's a sign, all through history, of sin... But, you know... he who commands the fly has always been seen... as a mark of the Devil."*

Yes, it was likely said tongue-in-cheek, but it also intrigued me. And so, what exactly does the Bible have to say about flies? Well after an exhaustive search, (i.e. Googling the words "flies" and "maggots" in the Bible), he's right – the Bible doesn't have anything good to say about flies.

Our first encounter is in Exodus chapter 8 where God visited plague after plague on the land of Egypt trying to convince Pharaoh that he should release his Hebrew slaves.

We read excerpts from That Fourth Plague this morning. But, I think it is also notable that The Third Plague was gnats, much smaller but somewhat similar insects. *...Aaron stretched out his hand with his staff and struck the dust of the earth, and gnats came on humans and animals alike; all the dust of the earth turned into gnats throughout the whole land of Egypt... But Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he would not listen to them, just as the Lord had said.*

And of course, let us not forget that these were not the only creepy crawly insects to join that party! Plague number 8, you will likely recall, were the Locusts, who descended upon Egypt to gobble up what leafy vegetation that had managed to escape the hail.

The Exodus story is often repeated throughout the Old and New Testaments both as a proof of God's might and love for his suffering people. But it is also used as a warning for that nation, established by those very freed slaves, that they too might suffer the same consequences if they failed to follow God's laws.

Psalms 78:40-46
How often they rebelled against him in the wilderness
and grieved him in the wasteland!
Again and again they put God to the test;

*they vexed the Holy One of Israel.
They did not remember his power—
the day he redeemed them from the oppressor...
He sent swarms of flies that devoured them,
and frogs that devastated them.
He gave their crops to the grasshopper,
their produce to the locust.*

*Isaiah 7:17-18 The Lord will bring on you and on your people and on your ancestral house such days as have not come since the day that Ephraim departed from Judah..."
On that day the Lord will whistle for the fly that is at the sources of the streams of Egypt, and for the bee that is in the land of Assyria.*

But since there are relatively few references to flies, I decided to also include references to maggots, since flies spend a far greater percentage of their life cycle in this larval stage. Again, all references are negative and we also first encounter these squiggly, slimies in Exodus as God's people traveled through the Sinai desert.

*Exodus 16:11-16 The Lord said to Moses, "I have heard the grumbling of the Israelites. Tell them, 'At twilight you will eat meat, and in the morning you will be filled with bread.'" ...When the dew was gone, thin flakes like frost on the ground appeared on the desert floor. When the Israelites saw it, they said to each other, "What is it?" For they did not know what it was.
Moses said to them, "It is the bread the Lord has given you to eat. This is what the Lord has commanded: 'Everyone is to gather as much as they need...'" The Israelites did as they were told; some gathered much, some little. ...the one who gathered much did not have too much, and the one who gathered little did not have too little... Then Moses said to them, "No one is to keep any of it until morning." However, some of them paid no attention to Moses; they kept part of it until morning, but it was full of maggots and began to smell...*

Those tiny, outside invaders spoiled the harder manna as a sign of God's punishment. Not only are they irritating as they buzz around but we also know now that they spread diseases that can kill.

It's really hard to say anything nice about 'em, but they do a pretty good job of cleaning up dead carcasses and lots of other disgusting stuff which might do us harm.

Which the prophet Isaiah also reminded his listeners that they too needed to be concerned with. (and for those of you who are weak of stomach you may want to plug your ears to this warning given to the unfaithful).

Isaiah 14:9-11 The realm of the dead below is all astir to meet you at your coming; it rouses the spirits of the departed to greet you— all those who were leaders in the world... All your pomp has been brought down to the grave, along with the noise of your harps; maggots are spread out beneath you and worms cover you.

Our final excerpt is from the book of Ecclesiastes chapter 10, where the purveyor of what is often considered as far more common wisdom always manages to point out the seemingly obvious in very profound poetry.

Ecclesiastes 10:1 As dead flies give perfume a bad smell, so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor... Even as fools walk along the road, they lack sense and show everyone just how stupid they are.

Flies have always been irritants, sources of pestilence, punishment, and usually the first to show up when something is dead or dying.

As a boy growing up on a farm, I quickly learned that whenever you came upon a swarm of buzzing flies you knew something was dead - or at least it was something you wouldn't want to step in.

Now I'm not saying that the fly which descended upon the VP's head the other night is an omen for who might be the "Lord of the Flies!" But perhaps we can see this as at least an unintentional symbol?

Jesus used similar metaphors quite often, just as we read this morning. The old order, especially the corrupt political and religious institutions, he claimed were not only dead, but were actually spreading their infection and thus killing everyone around them.

The system was rotting from the inside, filled with necrotic tissue, because they had displaced the law of God that was supposed to reside within their hearts.

Those purveyors of false worship of God were, he said, in actuality tombs that contained lifeless, rotting carcasses that were now swarming with maggots.

Now we shouldn't need a little fly to tell us that the current state of things stinks. The current system in this country is malodorous in God's nostrils and far from what we know that God desires.

As we often say, euphemistically, but in this case, it literally applies - "It stinks to high heaven!" And perhaps that earlier political commentator is actually on to something as a sign of sin and indicative of the Devil's designs?

Sure it's okay for us to laugh at that little fly invading such an austere occasion, (God knows we need a little humor these days), but maybe we can also see it as a sign of hope, a sign that the current system - the current state of things is decaying.

I want to conclude this morning by going back into the desert where, we are told, that some folks were able to gather more manna than they actually needed for their daily sustenance, while others couldn't seem to gather enough - but where everyone had enough once it had been redistributed.

Every family got their ration of manna every day!
The maggots only destroyed the excess of what a few were trying to hoard and not share with others.

What a great symbol for us to take note of!
Oh those disgusting, irritating little flies...
But maybe they are actually one of the best metaphors, one that we really need right now, to expose the hypocrisy and the lawlessness so rampant in our current rotten social order?

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