

Homiletics Analysis: Exodus 9

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Exodus 9 records three of the ten plagues against Egypt: the fifth (livestock death, vv. 1–7), the sixth (boils, vv. 8–12), and the seventh (hail, vv. 13–35). Together they form the middle movement of the plague cycle, escalating in intensity and scope. The livestock plague kills all Egyptian animals while Israel's remain entirely unharmed — a clean, verifiable separation. The boils plague, uniquely, strikes the body of Pharaoh's own magicians, rendering them unable to stand before Moses and finally silencing their counterfeit opposition. The hail plague is the most extensive and destructive yet: fire falls mixed with hail, crops are devastated, and for the first time God makes explicit the full theological rationale for the entire plague sequence — not merely to deliver Israel but to display His name throughout the earth and to demonstrate that there is none like Him in all the earth (vv. 14–16). Pharaoh hardens again after the livestock and hail plagues. After the boils plague, however, the text introduces a startling new formulation: the LORD *hardened* Pharaoh's heart (v. 12) — the first occurrence of divine hardening replacing Pharaoh's self-hardening. A Canaanite official among Pharaoh's servants who fears the LORD's word actually heeds the warning and brings his livestock and servants in from the field, while those who disregard the word of the LORD lose everything to the hail (vv. 20–21). The chapter closes with Pharaoh's momentary confession of sin (v. 27) and his immediate return to hardness once the plague lifts.

This Text — Intent

God is seeking to produce a settled, unshakeable conviction in the reader that He is sovereign over all creation, all rulers, and all history — that His purposes cannot be resisted, His judgments cannot be negotiated, and His warnings cannot be safely ignored. Through the escalating plagues, the explicit theological statement in verses 14–16, the divine hardening of verse 12, and the contrasting responses of the obedient official and the hardened Pharaoh, God is pressing the reader toward both reverence and trust: reverence before His unmatched power and holiness, and trust that this same sovereign God distinguishes His people, hears His servants, and will accomplish His redemptive purposes through the hardest circumstances imaginable. The text also confronts every reader with the anatomy of a hardened heart — Pharaoh's cycle of confession under pressure and return to rebellion when pressure lifts is a mirror held up to the reader's own tendency toward temporary repentance.

Subject Sentence: The LORD demonstrates His unrivaled sovereignty over creation, rulers, and history through mounting judgment on Egypt.

Primary Claim: God is pressing every reader — through the escalating plagues, the explicit declaration of His purposes, and Pharaoh’s anatomy of false repentance — to take His word seriously now, before hardness makes response impossible: there is no one like Him, His judgments are real, and His warnings do not return void.

Interpretive Evaluation

The Hardening of Pharaoh’s Heart

The most theologically contested element of Exodus 9 is verse 12: “*But the LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh.*” This is the first occurrence of divine hardening in the plague narrative (earlier occurrences attributed hardening to Pharaoh himself: 7:13, 7:22, 8:15, 8:19, 8:32, 9:7). Its introduction at this precise moment — after the boils silence the magicians and the divine hardening of Pharaoh — is theologically intentional and exegetically significant.

Arminian/Wesleyan reading: Many in the Arminian tradition read the divine hardening as God’s permissive act — allowing or ratifying what Pharaoh had already chosen, rather than actively causing a state Pharaoh did not himself choose. This reading preserves libertarian free will and avoids apparent divine injustice in holding Pharaoh accountable for a condition God produced. The reading is not without textual support — the earlier passages do attribute hardening to Pharaoh. However, the text at verse 12 does not use permissive language. The Hebrew *chāzaq* (strengthen/harden) with the LORD as explicit grammatical subject is active, not permissive. Paul’s extended treatment in Romans 9:14–18, which cites Exodus 9:16 directly, explicitly frames the hardening as God’s active sovereign purpose (“For this very purpose I have raised you up”), not as divine permission. The Arminian reading should be *qualified*: there is genuine sequence (Pharaoh hardened himself first; God’s hardening does not occur in a vacuum), but the text resists reducing divine hardening to mere ratification.

Dispensational reading: Dispensational interpreters sometimes treat the hardening primarily within the Israel-Egypt typological framework — Pharaoh as a figure of the Gentile nations who will oppose Israel, the plagues as anticipatory of end-times judgment. This reading is suggestive typologically but does not affect the primary interpretive questions about hardening and sovereignty. It should be *acknowledged* where it illuminates the text’s canonical trajectory without displacing the passage’s own claims.

Reformed reading: The Reformed reading, following Paul’s own exegesis in Romans 9, takes the divine hardening as genuinely active — God sovereignly ordaining Pharaoh’s resistance as the context in which His power will be most fully displayed and His name

most widely proclaimed. This does not eliminate Pharaoh's culpability — Pharaoh is condemned throughout for his own choices — but it situates those choices within God's sovereign purpose. The text of verses 14–16 makes the divine purpose explicit in a way that resists reduction to mere foreknowledge or permission: God raised Pharaoh up *for the purpose* of displaying His power and proclaiming His name. The Reformed reading best accounts for the full force of both the active hardening language and the explicit teleological statement of verses 14–16.

The Obedient Egyptian Official

Verses 20–21 introduce an unnamed Egyptian among Pharaoh's servants who “feared the word of the LORD” and sheltered his servants and livestock, while others “did not take to heart the word of the LORD” and lost everything. This is frequently passed over in preaching but deserves attention. It establishes that the plagues served a proclamatory function beyond Israel — the word of the LORD is being made available to Egyptians as well as Israelites. Response to that word, not ethnic identity, determines whether one is spared. This is a canonical seed of the broader Abrahamic promise that all nations would be blessed (Genesis 12:3). The Reformed reading should *acknowledge* this as genuine grace extended beyond the covenant people without domesticating it into a general salvific universalism — it is the specific mercy of a specific warning taken seriously.

Pharaoh's Confession in Verse 27

Pharaoh's confession — “*I have sinned this time; the LORD is in the right, and I and my people are the wicked ones*” — is sometimes treated as a genuine moment of repentance that God fails to honor, which would make God appear capricious. This reading should be *refuted*. The text makes clear in verse 34 that when the rain and hail ceased, Pharaoh “sinned again and hardened his heart.” The confession was situational, coerced by suffering, and produced no change in direction. This is not suppressed repentance — it is false repentance. Moses himself declares in verse 30 that he knows Pharaoh and his servants do not yet fear the LORD God, even while agreeing to intercede. True repentance produces lasting redirection; Pharaoh's confession produces only temporary respite-seeking.

Key Canonical Support

- **Romans 9:14–18** — Paul cites Exodus 9:16 directly (“For this very purpose I have raised you up, to show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth”) to ground his defense of divine sovereignty and the hardening of Pharaoh, establishing that God's mercy and hardening serve His revealed redemptive purpose, not human desert.
- **Exodus 19:5–6 / Deuteronomy 4:32–40** — The Mosaic covenant and Moses' retrospective address establish that the signs and wonders of Egypt were unique

demonstrations of divine identity, designed to create a people who knew their God firsthand and could declare His incomparability to the nations.

- **Psalms 135:5–12 / Psalm 136:10–22** — The plagues are recalled in Israel’s worship as the irreducible demonstration that the LORD is above all gods and executes judgment on the nations — they function in canonical memory as the paradigm case of God’s unrivaled sovereignty.
- **Isaiah 45:5–7, 20–22** — God’s declaration of exclusive sovereignty (“I am the LORD, and there is no other”) resonates with the explicit claim of Exodus 9:14 (“that you may know there is none like me in all the earth”), establishing the plague narrative as an early instance of what Isaiah will declare universally.
- **Revelation 16:1–21** — The bowl judgments of Revelation recapitulate and intensify the Exodus plague imagery (sores, darkness, hail), establishing that the Exodus plagues are not merely historical but paradigmatic — the pattern by which God judges those who refuse repentance and how He finally vindicates His name before all creation.

Aim: To press the reader/hearer toward a settled reverence for God’s unmatched sovereignty and a searching self-examination of whether their own response to His word resembles the obedient official or the hardening Pharaoh.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1–3	The LORD sends Moses to Pharaoh with a warning: unless Israel is released, a severe plague will strike Egypt’s livestock — horses, donkeys, camels, herds, flocks	Fifth plague. “Let my people go that they may serve me” — the pattern formula repeated; deliverance is always purposive
4	The LORD declares He will make a distinction between Israel’s livestock and Egypt’s — none of Israel’s will die	Divine distinction/separation is a key theological motif across the plagues
5	The LORD sets a fixed time: “Tomorrow the LORD will do this thing”	The announcement in advance underscores that this is no natural event — it is scheduled divine

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
		judgment
6	The plague strikes the next day — all Egyptian livestock die; none of Israel's livestock dies	The completeness and precision of the judgment confirm God's word
7	Pharaoh investigates and confirms that none of Israel's livestock died — then hardens his heart and will not let the people go	Pharaoh's hardening survives even empirical confirmation; evidence does not produce faith
8–9	The LORD commands Moses and Aaron to take handfuls of soot from a kiln and scatter it in the air before Pharaoh; it will become fine dust producing boils on humans and animals throughout Egypt	Sixth plague. The kiln may echo brick-making labor of Hebrew slaves — judgment from the site of oppression
10	Moses and Aaron scatter the soot; boils break out on humans and animals throughout Egypt	
11	The magicians cannot stand before Moses because of the boils — the boils afflict them too	Final appearance of the magicians in the plague narrative; their counterfeit power has been exhausted
12	The LORD hardened Pharaoh's heart; he did not listen, just as the LORD had spoken to Moses	First occurrence of active divine hardening; marks a theological escalation in the narrative
13–16	Moses is sent again with the formula "Let my people go that they may serve me." The LORD declares this time He could have cut off Egypt entirely but has restrained Himself — the purpose: to show His power and proclaim His name throughout the earth	The most explicit theological statement in the plague narrative; God names His own purpose; cite Romans 9:17

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
17	Accusation: Pharaoh still exalts himself against God's people	The heart of Pharaoh's sin — not merely disobedience but self-exaltation against the LORD
18–19	Warning: tomorrow, the worst hail ever to fall on Egypt; shelter your livestock and servants or they will die	Unprecedented advance warning; grace extended even in the context of judgment
20–21	Those among Pharaoh's servants who feared the word of the LORD brought their servants and livestock inside; those who did not regard the word of the LORD left them in the field	Unexpected division within Egypt — response to God's word, not ethnicity, determines outcomes
22–25	The LORD commands Moses to stretch out his hand; hail falls with fire throughout Egypt, the worst since Egypt became a nation	Seventh plague. "Fire ran down in the midst of the hail" — unique; the natural order is inverted
26	Only in the land of Goshen (where Israel lived) was there no hail	The pattern of divine distinction continues
27–28	Pharaoh summons Moses and Aaron: "I have sinned this time; the LORD is in the right; I am wicked. Plead with the LORD — enough of God's thunder and hail. I will let you go."	Pharaoh's confession — the most explicit yet; but see vv. 30, 34
29–30	Moses agrees to intercede, declaring the thunder and hail will cease — but he states plainly that he knows Pharaoh and his servants still do not fear the LORD God	Moses' prophetic discernment of false repentance; genuine pastoral realism
31–32	The flax and barley were struck (they were in season); the wheat and spelt were not (not yet grown)	Historical and agricultural verisimilitude; the plagues have genuine, specific, material consequences

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
33–34	Moses leaves the city, spreads his hands to the LORD, the thunder and hail cease — Pharaoh sins again, hardens his heart, he and his servants	The predicted false repentance confirmed
35	Pharaoh’s heart was hardened and he did not let the Israelites go, just as the LORD had spoken through Moses	The chapter closes confirming God’s word has come to pass exactly as declared

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–7	Fifth Plague: Livestock Death and the Distinction That Evidence Cannot Override
2	8–12	Sixth Plague: Boils, the Silencing of Counterfeits, and the First Divine Hardening
3	13–21	The Theological Declaration: Why God Is Doing This — and the Warning That Divides Egypt
4	22–35	Seventh Plague: Hail, False Confession, and the Anatomy of a Hardened Heart

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: The LORD demonstrates His unrivaled sovereignty over creation, rulers, and history through mounting judgment on Egypt.

Primary Claim: God is pressing every reader — through the escalating plagues, the explicit declaration of His purposes, and Pharaoh’s anatomy of false repentance — to take His

word seriously now, before hardness makes response impossible: there is no one like Him, His judgments are real, and His warnings do not return void.

Applications (Five)

1. [Mind/Belief] — Reframe what “no one like Him” actually demands of your thinking.

Verses 14–16 are not background theology — they are a direct claim on how you orient your entire life. The God who scheduled a plague for tomorrow, who kept every Egyptian animal dead and every Israelite animal alive, who overrode Pharaoh’s defiance at the cellular level, and who declared His own name as the purpose behind it all is not a religious resource you access for help. He is the LORD, and there is no one like Him in all the earth. The practical implication is confrontational: every competing claim on your ultimate loyalty — career, approval, security, control — is measured against this God and found absurd. The Exodus is asking you whether you think and live as though you actually believe this.

2. [Affections/Worship] — Let the progression of the plagues produce genuine fear of the LORD, not merely information about Him. The Egyptian official in verses 20–21 is not described as having been persuaded by argument — he *feared the word of the LORD* and acted. Fear of the LORD is not anxiety about punishment; it is the right-ordered response to encountering the real God in the fullness of His power. The plagues are designed to produce it. Sit long enough in the reality of hail mixed with fire, of a scheduled judgment that arrives exactly when promised, of boils that silence the powerful and spare the humble. Let what is being described here actually land. Most readers of this text are moved by it intellectually and unmoved by it emotionally. That gap is itself a spiritual warning.

3. [Mind/Belief] — Understand that Pharaoh’s hardening and God’s sovereignty are not a threat to His justice but a display of His mercy’s costliness. Verse 12 unsettles readers who feel God’s active hardening of Pharaoh is unfair. But read verses 13–19 carefully: the same God who hardened Pharaoh’s heart also issued unprecedented advance warning before the hail, told Egypt exactly what was coming, gave them time to shelter their servants and livestock, and extended that mercy to every Egyptian who would receive it. Divine sovereignty and genuine human responsibility coexist in the same chapter. The hardening of Pharaoh is not the template for your situation — it is the extreme end of a process that began with Pharaoh’s own repeated self-hardening. The text is not teaching that God arbitrarily damns people without warning. It is teaching that prolonged, repeated rejection of God’s word has a trajectory, and that trajectory ends somewhere.

4. [Will/Behavior] — Examine whether your response to God’s word under pressure resembles Pharaoh’s pattern or the obedient official’s pattern. Pharaoh’s pattern in verses 27–35 is painfully recognizable: genuine distress in the storm, verbal confession of sin, urgent request for relief, immediate return to the previous pattern when the pressure lifts. This is not a pagan anomaly — it is a universal human tendency, including among those who know the Scriptures. The diagnostic question is: what do you do with what you know when the knowing costs nothing? The official did not wait until the hail fell to act on

the warning. He rearranged his life on the basis of God's word before the pressure came. Where in your life are you waiting for the hail before you act on what you already know to be true?

5. [Affections/Worship] — Receive the distinction God makes between His people and Egypt as a ground for gratitude, not pride. Three times in this chapter God makes a clean distinction: Israel's livestock live, Egypt's die (v. 4–6); Goshen has no hail, Egypt is devastated (v. 26); the obedient official's household is spared, the indifferent official's is not (vv. 20–21). In each case the distinction is entirely God's doing — He announces it, He executes it, He verifies it. If you are among those whom God has distinguished by grace — rescued, named, covered — the only appropriate response is not self-congratulation but astonished gratitude. The Israelites in Goshen did nothing to stop the hail. Neither did you earn the grace that shelters you. Let that reality produce worship rather than comfort.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Exodus 9 contains what may be the most explicit statement of God's own purpose in the plague narrative: *“For this purpose I have raised you up, to show you my power, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth”* (v. 16). This verse establishes that the plagues are not primarily about Israel's deliverance — deliverance is the means, not the end. The end is the worldwide proclamation of God's name and the demonstration that He is without rival in all creation. The passage also introduces, for the first time in the plague cycle, God's active hardening of Pharaoh's heart (v. 12), establishing that human resistance to God — even the resistance of the most powerful ruler on earth — operates within, not outside, the LORD's sovereign governance. The contrast between Pharaoh's false confession and the obedient Egyptian official's genuine response to God's word further teaches that God is not partial to birth, status, or nationality — He responds to those who fear His word, and He is not obligated to those who disregard it.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Exodus 9, and specifically verse 16, is Paul's proof text in Romans 9:17 for the doctrine of divine sovereignty in election and reprobation. The Reformed tradition reads the plague narrative as the paradigm case for what the Westminster Confession calls God's sovereign ordination of ends through means — Pharaoh's resistance is not outside God's plan but within it, raised up precisely to provide the context in which God's power is most fully displayed. This does not make God the author of sin or Pharaoh a puppet; Pharaoh is genuinely and culpably responsible throughout. But it does mean that God's redemptive purposes are not contingent on human cooperation — they are accomplished through and beyond human resistance. The text also provides the earliest canonical grounding for the Reformed insistence that grace

is particular and distinguishing: God draws a line between Goshen and Egypt, between Israel's herds and Egypt's, not because of anything in Israel but entirely by His own sovereign choice. The gospel in seed form is here: God makes a distinction in judgment, covers His people while judgment falls, and accomplishes this entirely by His own initiative.

Main Takeaway

There is no one like the LORD in all the earth — not in power, not in purpose, not in the precision with which His word comes to pass. He scheduled the plague for tomorrow and it came tomorrow. He drew a line around Goshen and the hail stopped at that line. He warned Egypt before the hail fell, and the only question was whether anyone would take Him seriously. The same word is in front of you right now. Don't wait for the hail to decide whether it's real.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Reducing the plagues to a children's story or a special effects sequence.** The ten plagues are frequently preached with an emphasis on the dramatic — the darkness, the frogs, the hail mixed with fire. This can produce amazement at the spectacle while missing the passage's sustained theological argument. Exodus 9 contains the most explicit statement of God's purpose in the entire plague cycle (vv. 14–16). A sermon that marvels at the hail without preaching the theological declaration of verses 14–16 has preached the wrapper and missed the gift.
- **Preaching the divine hardening without engaging its difficulty honestly.** Verse 12 introduces a genuinely difficult doctrine and most preachers either skip it or flatten it into permission language that the text does not support. Skipping it fails the congregation by leaving them without a category for what Paul will later argue explicitly in Romans 9. Flattening it into “God just allowed Pharaoh to choose” avoids the actual claim. The text can be preached with pastoral care and theological rigor simultaneously — name the difficulty, work through the sequence (Pharaoh hardened himself first, repeatedly), let the text carry its own weight without domesticating it.
- **Treating Pharaoh's confession in verse 27 as genuine repentance that God refuses to honor.** This reading, if left unchallenged, makes God appear capricious — as though He ignores sincere confession. Moses' own declaration in verse 30 that Pharaoh “does not yet fear the LORD God” is prophetic discernment of false repentance, not cynicism. The preacher must establish clearly that the confession was situational and coerced, and that its falseness was confirmed in verse 34 when Pharaoh hardened again immediately. This passage is a clinical portrait of false repentance, not a case of God ignoring genuine contrition.

- **Missing the obedient Egyptian official in verses 20–21.** This figure is easy to pass over because the passage moves quickly, but he is theologically significant. He is an Egyptian — a member of the oppressing nation — who fears the word of the LORD and acts on it, and who is therefore spared. He is a canonical signal that God’s purposes through Israel are universal in scope, that the promise to Abraham (all nations blessed) is already beginning to materialize, and that response to God’s word — not ethnic or covenant identity — is the proximate ground of sparing. This figure is a gift for applications about genuine vs. nominal response to the word of God.
- **Preaching the distinction between Israel and Egypt as ethnic favoritism rather than sovereign grace.** Three times this chapter, God draws a line between Israel and Egypt. Preachers can inadvertently communicate that God has a preference for a particular people in a way that sounds arbitrary or tribal. The text grounds the distinction not in Israel’s merit but in the LORD’s sovereign purpose — “I have raised you up for this purpose” (v. 16) — and extends the principle of distinction to an Egyptian who fears His word (vv. 20–21). The distinction is not ethnic; it is covenantal and responsive. Preach it as grace, not favoritism, and press the congregation to ask on which side of the distinction they are living.
- **Failing to connect the passage to its New Testament interpretation.** Romans 9:14–18 is not a possible connection to this passage — it is Paul’s own authorized interpretation of it. A preacher who works through Exodus 9:16 without acknowledging Paul’s use of it in Romans 9 is preaching the passage in canonical isolation. The connection need not dominate the sermon, but it should be made, both because it helps the congregation navigate a hard doctrine and because it establishes the passage’s canonical weight in the New Testament argument about the character of God’s sovereign mercy.