

EXODUS

THE GOD WHO RESCUES

SESSION OBJECTIVE: EXODUS 10:21-29

To understand more about the ninth plague, darkness.

Read the Text:

“Then the LORD said to Moses, “Stretch out your hand toward heaven, that there may be darkness over the land of Egypt, a darkness to be felt.” 22 So Moses stretched out his hand toward heaven, and there was pitch darkness in all the land of Egypt three days. 23 They did not see one another, nor did anyone rise from his place for three days, but all the people of Israel had light where they lived. 24 Then Pharaoh called Moses and said, “Go, serve the LORD; your little ones also may go with you; only let your flocks and your herds remain behind.” 25 But Moses said, “You must also let us have sacrifices and burnt offerings, that we may sacrifice to the LORD our God. 26 Our livestock also must go with us; not a hoof shall be left behind, for we must take of them to serve the LORD our God, and we do not know with what we must serve the LORD until we arrive there.” 27 But the LORD hardened Pharaoh’s heart, and he would not let them go. 28 Then Pharaoh said to him, “Get away from me; take care never to see my face again, for on the day you see my face you shall die.” 29 Moses said, ‘As you say! I will not see your face again.’” (Exodus 10:1-20, ESV)

Study the Text:

Plague #9: Darkness

The ninth plague is a different kind of plague than what the Egyptians have previously faced. While the blood in the Nile restricted their water, the frogs, gnats, and flies, were a nuisance, the loss of livestock was an economic disaster, the boils were a personal irritant, and the hail and locusts were damaging to their ecosystem, the night plague of darkness was both practically limiting and symbolically ominous. Darkness and death often walk hand in hand, which means the ninth plague of darkness in some ways anticipates the tenth plague of death (spoiler: death follows). Below is a breakdown of some of the key details in this passage.

INSTANTANEOUS

The beginning of this passage describes the institution of this ninth plague: “Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘Stretch out your hand toward heaven, that there may be darkness over the land of Egypt, a darkness to be felt.’ So Moses stretched out his hand toward heaven, and there was pitch darkness in all the land of Egypt three days” (Ex. 10:21-22). Unlike the plague of locusts that preceded this one in which the plague gradually became present, the force of the Hebrew indicates that it was immediately dark. It’s easy to imagine the sun slowly lowering and the sky slowly becoming darker and darker, but the text indicates that it immediately became dark. The sudden nature of such a plague would have been both shocking and disconcerting to say the least.

DARKNESS CAN’T BE FELT

There is an unfortunate translation in verse 21: “...that there may be darkness over the land of Egypt, a darkness to be felt.” This is a strange rendering of the Hebrew here. Darkness cannot be felt. Perhaps it could imply that because the sun is (presumably) blocked, the lack of heat would be felt, or perhaps a more metaphysical meaning is intended (the darkness is felt emotionally), but neither of these options are convincing. The Hebrew construction here is considered a *hapax logomenon*, a word that is only used one

time within the body of a work, so translating it is difficult. The Hebrew term employed is the hiphil of a root in the piel conjugation that means, “to feel around with one’s hands, to grope.” Another way of translating might be: “A darkness that causes one to feel one’s way around.”

In other words, the darkness is so dark that one must use their hands to grope about their surroundings in order to not run into a wall or trip over a table. This kind of darkness is unusually cumbersome. This is further highlighted by the descriptor in verse 22, translated in the ESV as “pitch darkness,” but more literally, “the darkest of darkness.” It was so dark that even apart from the common lanterns of the ancient world, “they did not see one another, nor did anyone rise from his place for three days.” The Egyptians were literally in the dark, while the Israelites could still see (Ex. 10:23). Given that each plague increases in intensity, this means that worse than biting insects, boils, or hail is being separated from people. Darkness and isolation are truly a horrible reality. There is no indication given for how this darkness can be physically explained. Was the sun blocked? Was there an eclipse? Were the lanterns not working? Could no one make a fire? Truthfully, no physical explanation is required. None of the plagues can really be physically explained; that’s what makes them supernatural. They are above nature and require God’s direct intervention in order to be accomplished.

THREE DAYS

It is not uncommon for Christians to read the details of Christ and the resurrection into other stories of the Bible, and the presence of the “three days” detail is immediately attention grabbing. Is this a foreshadowing or nod to the resurrection? Perhaps it is in that this is an opposite example of resurrection. The people of Egypt spend three days in the darkness of judgment while Christ spends three days in the darkness of judgment in a grave. Both “judgments” are enacted by God Himself. However, while Christ was in the grave (i.e. darkness) for three days, He overcomes the grave with an explosion of life and joy, while this plague will only lead to an explosion of death and sorrow. Three days is a common moniker in ancient language to communicate a set amount of time, but it might be more symbolic than the original audience would have understood it.

THE LIVESTOCK

The dispute between Pharaoh and Moses during the negotiations prior to the eighth plague involved whether or not the Israelites could bring their young children along with them to serve the LORD in the wilderness (Ex. 10:9-11). Now, during the negotiations preceding this ninth plague, the issue is whether or not the Israelites can bring their livestock. Pharaoh has relented to let the young and old go (Ex. 10:24), but wanted them to leave their livestock in Egypt while they went. The idea implied here is that the Israelites would *have* to return lest they forfeit their wellbeing. The livestock would serve as a hook to reel them back after too long. However, Moses reasons with Pharaoh that the livestock must come because serving the LORD will entail “sacrifices and burnt offerings” (Ex. 10:25). This final dispute is enough to send Pharaoh into a furious frenzy: “Then Pharaoh said to him, ‘Get away from me; take care never to see my face again, for on the day you see my face you shall die’” (Ex. 10:28).

THE CONCLUSION

This interaction concludes with Moses replying to Pharaoh: “As you say! I will not see your face again” (Ex. 10:29). The literal translation is something like: “You’ve said the very thing!” In other words, Moses is essentially telling Pharaoh that he has predicted what will eventually be the future. However, there is yet one more interaction they will have prior to the tenth and final plague.

What About Now?

One takeaway is just how devastating darkness can be. The ninth plague is not physically painful in the same way that boils or biting insects would be, nor is it capable of bringing death in the same way as large hail, but it is somehow still worse. Three days of not being able to leave your dwelling place because of the sheer darkness is a terrifying reality to live within, and one that rightly deserves to come right before the Passover. It is, in part, for this reason that darkness is one of the elements used to describe the reality of hell in the New Testament. Both 2 Peter 2:4 and Jude 6 describe hell as a place with “chains” in “gloomy darkness.” It is likewise described as a place of darkness in Revelation 16:10. Darkness is not simply symbolic in the Bible, but a literal place of agony. Another takeaway is the fact that God will not compromise His will. His will was for Israel, both young and old, and all of their livestock, to come out of Egypt. All through the Exodus narrative we find Pharaoh attempting to negotiate the terms of their release with portions of Israel being held back. Whether it was only going a little distance, or only the old going, or only the humans going, Pharaoh continued to attempt to change the terms of agreement. God, however, will not compromise. He *will* accomplish His purpose (Ps. 138:8).

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Exodus 10:21. What did the LORD tell Moses to do? What would be the result of such an action? According to the notes, how should the end of verse 22 be translated and understood?

2. Read Exodus 10:22. What did Moses do? What resulted? Is there any significance to the “three days” mentioned here?

Day Two

1. Read Exodus 10:23. How did the plague affect the people of Egypt?

2. Read Exodus 10:24. What did Pharaoh finally agree to allow Moses to do? What did he try to negotiate with Moses?

Day Three

1. Read Exodus 10:25-26. Why, according to Moses, could the Israelites not leave their livestock behind? What were they going to be required to do in the wilderness that would necessitate bringing livestock?

2. Read Exodus 10:27. What did the LORD do to Pharaoh? What resulted?

Day Four

1. Read Exodus 10:28. How did Pharaoh respond to Moses?

2. Read Exodus 10:29. What did Moses say in response to Pharaoh?

Discuss the Text!

Week 23 Discussion: Isolation

What makes the ninth plague so brutal is the apparent isolation it forced the Egyptians into: “They did not see one another, nor did anyone rise from his place for three days, but all the people of Israel had light where they lived” (Ex. 10:23). Isolation is devastating for a number of reasons. Talk as a group about the ways in which isolation has personally affected you, and what to do when you find yourself isolating.

1. Icebreaker: When is isolation a good thing (think: taking a nap, reading, etc.)?
2. When you experience hardship do you naturally isolate or do you seek out comfort from others?
3. How has isolation negatively impacted you in the past?
4. What are some red flags that you are moving into isolation?
5. What do you require to get you to come out of isolation and back into community?
6. How can the church practically work against the tendency to isolate?

Takeaways:

1. The ninth plague is a sudden, sustained darkness over all of Egypt that isolates the people living there.
2. Pharaoh relents and allows the young and the old in Israel to leave, but will not allow the livestock to go with them.
3. The darkness breaks Pharaoh’s resolve.
4. Pharaoh’s heart is hardened and he orders Moses to leave his presence without letting the people go.