

## Exodus 10:21-29

### Introduction

This morning, we come to the third plague of round three – or we could also say the final plague of the final round. After this, all that will remain is one more plague – the one plague that everything else has been moving toward, the *one* plague that God foretold from the very beginning. Just like the third plague of the previous two rounds, there is no announcement of this plague – no confrontation with Pharaoh, no warning. We begin in verse twenty-one:

**I. Exodus 10:21–23a** — Then the LORD said to Moses, “Stretch out your hand toward heaven, that there may be darkness over the land of Egypt, a darkness that causes one to grope and feel about.”<sup>1</sup> So Moses stretched out his hand toward heaven, and there was pitch darkness in all the land of Egypt three days. They did not see one another, nor did anyone rise from his place for three days...

That’s it? – we may ask. The final plague of the final round, the grand finale before the ultimate grand finale is... darkness? Certainly, there were other plagues more harmful and painful, some that even caused death. Think of the swarming locusts, and the painful boils. Or what about the supernatural, unending storm of thunder and hail, and fire running down to the earth, and fire flashing continually in the midst of the hail, which happens to be striking down every living thing that doesn’t seek shelter – plant, animal and human being? These are things that might at least *sound* more dramatic than darkness. So why should darkness be chosen as the final plague of the final round?

Ever since God said, “Let there be light,” there had been evening and morning, the constant, unending, completely predictable succession of day and night – light and darkness. All we’ve ever known – all we could ever possibly fathom is the light of day, followed by the darkness of night, always, seemingly inevitably followed by the sunrise of another day. There’s nothing more basic or more taken for granted by all human beings, young and old, everywhere on earth than the reappearance of the sun after the darkness of night. On Monday, August 21<sup>st</sup>, 2017, hundreds of thousands of Americans will have just finished eating their lunch when suddenly the brightness of noonday will be completely swallowed up by the darkness of night. The stars and constellations will all come out, and it will be too dark to see anyone or anything around you. Today, everyone will know that this is a total solar eclipse, but that doesn’t mean that people won’t still be trembling, and somewhat disconcerted deep down inside. We know there is a perfectly rational and scientific explanation, but somehow when the darkness of night swallows up the brightness of noonday, our insides can’t help but to at least turn a few nervous

---

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Stuart; Durham; Bible Sense Lexicon; Gen. 27:12, 22 (the blind Isaac *feeling* Jacob); Gen. 31:34, 37 (Laban *feeling* about through Rachel’s dark tent and through all Jacob’s goods)

Deuteronomy 28:29 — and you shall grope at noonday, as the blind *grope* in darkness, and you shall not prosper in your ways. And you shall be only oppressed and robbed continually, and there shall be no one to help you.

Job 5:14 — They meet with darkness in the daytime and *grope* at noonday as in the night.

Job 12:25 — They *grope* in the dark without light, and he makes them stagger like a drunken man.

The only other time this verb (*ms*) appears with the hiphil (causative) stem is in Judges 16:26 (cf. Currid):

Judges 16:26 — And Samson said to the young man who held him by the hand, “*Cause me to feel* the pillars on which the house rests, that I may lean against them.”

summersaults. So think about those in centuries past who had no explanation and no warning and we should be able to understand why they would sometimes weep and scream in fear.

But this is just a solar eclipse – something that lasts for only a few minutes. How can we even imagine this darkness lasting for three entire days? How can we imagine the terror of a night that never ends? Only that’s not what happened in Egypt. Even at night there’s light. There is the “lesser light” that “rule[s] over the night” (Gen. 1:16), and then even when the moon isn’t shining there are still the stars. The three-day darkness of the ninth plague was not the darkness of night. The Lord said to Moses: “Stretch out your hand toward heaven, that there may be darkness over the land of Egypt, a darkness that causes one to grope and feel about.”

Rarely do we ever experience this kind of darkness, and if we do, it’s never for long. This is a darkness that makes your eyes completely and totally useless. It blinds you and disorients you, forcing you to use your hands just to move and find your way around. The Scripture says: “They did not see one another, nor did anyone rise from his place for three days.” We might think of the unimaginable, absolute darkness that there was before God ever said, “Let there be light.” In fact, though we’ve traced many different themes throughout these plagues, one theme that we’ve saved until now is the connection that God seems to be making with creation.<sup>2</sup>

Remember, Genesis and Exodus are really both part of the same book, so when we read in Exodus seven that the “**rivers**” (*nahar*) in Egypt will all be turned to blood, we might be reminded of the “**river**” (*nahar*) in Genesis two that “flowed out of Eden to water the garden,” becoming four “**rivers** (*nahar*).”<sup>3</sup> The rivers in creation bring life. But now the life-giving rivers of Egypt stink of death.

When we read in Exodus eight that the Nile will **swarm** (*saras*) with frogs, it’s hard not to be reminded of God’s words on the fifth day of creation, “‘Let the waters **swarm** (*saras*) with **swarms** (*saras*) of living creatures...’ So God created... every living creature that moves, with which the waters **swarm** (*saras*)... And God saw that it was good.”<sup>4</sup> In Genesis, the swarming on Day 5 was a creative act of God’s goodness. But here in Exodus, creation is turned on its head, as it were, and the “swarms” become a curse and a judgment.

When we read in Exodus chapter nine that the hand of the Lord would fall with a very severe plague upon the **livestock** (*miqneh*) of the Egyptians, and also that boils would break out on man and **beast** (*behemah*), we might be reminded of God’s creation of “**livestock**” (*behemah*) on Day 6 and His purpose that man should have dominion over the “**livestock**.” (*behemah*).<sup>5</sup> What God created and then gave to man on the sixth day of creation, he now takes away from man as he strikes all the Egyptian livestock with disease and death. When we read later in Exodus nine that there would be hail on every **plant** (*eseb*) of the **field** (*sadeh*), we’re reminded of what God said on the third day of creation: “‘Let the earth sprout... **plants** (*eseb*) yielding seed...’ And it was so. The earth brought forth... **plants** (*eseb*) yielding seed,” and then Genesis 2, speaking of a

---

<sup>2</sup> See Enns, who seems to rely heavily on Zevit. Cf. Hamilton on 10:21-23

<sup>3</sup> Exod. 7:19; Gen. 2:10-14

<sup>4</sup> Exod. 8:3; Gen. 1:20-21; *saras* appears only 14 times in the Hebrew Bible

<sup>5</sup> Exod. 9:3-4, 6-7, 9-10; Gen. 1:24, 26

time when “no small **plant** (*eseb*) of the **field** (*sadeh*) had yet sprouted.”<sup>6</sup> The plants of the field that God created for the good of man on Day 3, He now destroys and pulverizes with His hail.

When we read in Exodus ten that locusts will eat every tree that “**sprouts**” (*smh*) in the “**field**” (*sadeh*), we hear echoes again of the language in Genesis two, where “no small plant of the **field** (*sadeh*) had yet **sprouted** (*smh*).”<sup>7</sup> And finally, in Genesis we read how God said on the third day of creation: “Let the earth sprout vegetation, **plants** (*eseb*) yielding seed, and **fruit** (*peri*) trees bearing **fruit** (*peri*),” and then on the sixth day: “to... everything that has the breath of life, I have given every **green** (*yereq*) **plant** (*eseb*) for food.”

How ominous, then, are these words in Exodus ten: “[The locusts] ate all the **plants** (*eseb*) in the land and all the **fruit** (*peri*) of the trees... Not a **green** (*yereq*) thing remained, neither tree nor **plant** (*eseb*) of the field (*sadeh*).”<sup>8</sup> So now we might ask this question: This final plague of the first three sets, this darkness that causes one to grope and feel about, is this the unimaginable, absolute darkness that there was **before** God ever said, “Let there be light”? We read in Genesis chapter one:

- ✓ Genesis 1:1–2 — In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and **darkness** (*hosek*) was **over** (*al*) the face of the deep.

And now, in Exodus ten:

- ✓ Exodus 10:21 — Then the LORD said to Moses, “Stretch out your hand toward heaven, that there may be **darkness** (*hosek*) **over** (*al*) the land of Egypt.”

It’s as though we’re meant to see the creation itself being reversed and turned on its head. The creation that in Genesis was pronounced “good,” bringing blessing to man, is now being systematically undone – literally terrorizing the Egyptians with death and destruction. We see now that the darkness is the ultimate, most *terrifying* step in the reversal and undoing of creation itself.

If the plague of darkness points us backward to a time before God ever spoke His creative word—when the earth was still without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep—then it also serves as a pattern, and so a warning of things to come. Verse 22 says: “So Moses stretched out his hand toward heaven, and there was pitch darkness in all the land of Egypt.” “Pitch darkness” is literally: “[the] darkness (*hosek*) of darkness (*apelah*)” using two different Hebrew words for darkness. This emphasizes again that this darkness is of a kind that we have never, ever experienced, and would never wish to experience. But even more importantly, throughout the rest of the Old Testament, whenever these two words for darkness are used together, they always describe the **terrors** of God’s judgment on us for our sin – and they’re always translated, “darkness” and “gloom.” The prophet Isaiah writes:

---

<sup>6</sup> Exod. 9:22; Gen. 1:11-12; *eseb* appears only 33 times in the Hebrew Bible

<sup>7</sup> Exod. 10:5; Gen. 2:5; the root *smh* appears only 33 times in the Hebrew Bible

<sup>8</sup> Gen. 1:11, 30; Exodus 10:15; cf. 10:12

- ✓ Isaiah 59:2, 9–10<sup>9</sup> — Your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear... Therefore... we hope for light, and behold, darkness [hosek], and for brightness, but we walk in **gloom**. [apelah] *We grope for the wall like the blind; we grope like those who have no eyes; we stumble at noon as in the twilight.*
- ✓ Joel 2:1–2 — The day of the LORD is coming; it is near... a day of darkness [hosek] and **gloom** [apelah], a day of clouds and thick darkness!
- ✓ Amos 5:20 — Is not the day of the LORD darkness [hosek], and not light, and **gloom** [apel] with no brightness in it?
- ✓ Zephaniah 1:14–15 — The great day of the LORD is near... A day of wrath is that day, a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation, a day of darkness [hosek] and **gloom** [apelah], a day of clouds and thick darkness.

In other words, even when the darkness is not something literal (as it is in Exodus), we should know that it's the best way to capture the terror, and misery, and insanity that always results from the judgments and wrath of God. The darkness announces the complete withdrawal of all the blessings of creation – even light itself, when I'm left with nothing but *me*, full of misery and terror. In a chapter that's patterned in part after the Ten Plagues, the Apostle John writes in Revelation:

- ✓ Revelation 16:10–11 — The fifth angel poured out his bowl on the throne of the beast, and its kingdom was plunged into **darkness**. People gnawed their tongues in anguish and cursed the God of heaven for their pain and sores.

Jesus describes the final abode of the wicked as a place of “outer **darkness**” where there will be “weeping and gnashing of teeth.” (Mat. 8:12; 22:13; 25:30; cf. 2 Pet. 2:4, 17; Jude 6, 13)

The plagues of Exodus are meant as a lesson to us. They're meant to cause us to **tremble** – really. Truly. Because the reality is that none of us have ever trembled as we could, or should. Jesus said to His disciples:

- ✓ Luke 12:5 — I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him!

The plagues in Exodus should cause us all to **feel** deep inside us our agreement with these words in Hebrews:

- ✓ Hebrews 10:31 — It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

Pharaoh is clearly coming to understand this, because we read now in verse 24:

**II. Exodus 10:24** — 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.”

---

<sup>9</sup> Isaiah 58:10 — If you pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then shall your light rise in the darkness [hosek] and your **gloom** [apelah] be as the noonday.

For the first time in all nine plagues, Pharaoh agrees to let the Israelites go—men, women, and children—*after* the plague has already ended. Always before, the end of the plague has only been an excuse for more stubbornness and more hardness of heart. We read in chapter eight:

- ✓ Exodus 8:15 — But when Pharaoh saw that there was a respite [from the frogs], he hardened his heart and would not listen.

And in chapter nine:

- ✓ Exodus 9:34 — But when Pharaoh saw that the rain and the hail and the thunder had ceased, he sinned yet again and hardened his heart.

How often are we just like this? When we think we're feeling the pain of God's discipline, we "repent" of our sin and vow to change. But then, when the threat has passed, or when life is normal again, we return to our old ways. We tremble only at the *experience* of God's discipline, rather than just at the *thought* of His fearful and righteous judgments. But if we only read our Bibles with our eyes open, we'll know that fear and trembling, for the Christian, should be a daily reality of life. In Pharaoh's case, after every judgment there was a reprieve. But for all the unrepentant, for all who presume on God's kindness and forbearance, there does come a day when there is no reprieve – when light is extinguished forever. Let us always remember this, even when life is "good."

Well, so terrifying was the darkness that even after the return of light Pharaoh is ready to let Israel go – men, women, and children. The only qualification, this time, is that the flocks and herds must remain behind.

**III. Exodus 10:25–26** — But Moses said, "You must also let us have sacrifices and burnt offerings, that we may sacrifice to the LORD our God. 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."

Once again, God is under no obligation to tell Pharaoh all that he intends. And Pharaoh is held accountable *only* for his failure to act in accordance with what God has revealed. Once again, another part of Yahweh's demand has been withheld from Pharaoh until now so that even as he makes his biggest concession yet, it's sure to be followed by the strongest hardening of his heart, ever. We read in verses 27-29:

**IV. Exodus 10:27–29** — But the LORD hardened Pharaoh's heart, and he would not let them go. 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." Moses said, "As you say! I will not see your face again."

One of the chief Egyptian gods was the sun god. Here are some Egyptian verses from "The book of the Dead": "I am he among the gods who cannot be repulsed.' Who is he? He is Atum, who is in his sun disc." (Quoted in Durham) And yet now, even the sun has been repulsed. Yahweh has taken away from the Egyptians what they considered to be the single most *sure* and most *certain* thing in all of life – the light of the sun – even the light of the moon, and the stars. And

yet it's *only now* that Pharaoh finally shuts the door on all negotiations. One commentator writes: "Pharaoh, ironically, cuts off the only means of salvation *he has* by banishing Moses from his presence forever. Of course, this too is according to God's plan. By having Pharaoh cast Moses out of his presence, God is in effect casting Pharaoh out of his presence." (Enns) How can we not look at the case of Pharaoh and tremble at the terrors of God's judgments? How can we not be warned against the sin of hardening our hearts and presuming on His kindness – the kindness that He shows us even in the "*light*" of each and every day that we live?

But is this all that we learn from this account of the plague of darkness? If you happen to be following along in your Bible, you know that we skipped thirteen wonderful words. "The LORD said to Moses, 'Stretch out your hand toward heaven, that there may be darkness over the land of Egypt, a darkness that causes one to grope and feel about.' So Moses stretched out his hand toward heaven, and there was pitch darkness in all the land of Egypt three days. They did not see one another, nor did anyone rise from his place for three days..."

**V. Exodus 10:23b** — ...but for all the people of Israel *there was light* where they lived.

Once again we hear, loud and clear, echoes of Genesis.

- ✓ Genesis 1:1–3 — In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. And God said, "Let there be light," and *there was light*.

Can you imagine this light that shone upon the Israelites in the midst of all the pitch darkness that was everywhere else in Egypt? If the darkness was a picture of the terrors of God's wrath, then isn't this light such a beautiful picture of God's steadfast *love and favor* shining on His people?<sup>10</sup> Light as the source not only of life, but of life abundant and full of joy and peace. Proverbs 4:19 says:

Proverbs 4:19 — The way of the wicked is like deep *darkness* [apelah]; they do not know over what they stumble.

But Proverbs 4:18 says this:

- ✓ Proverbs 4:18<sup>11</sup> — The path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, which shines brighter and brighter until full day.

The only problem is that the people of Israel were not righteous. They were stubborn and obstinate – no different than Pharaoh. Isaiah writes of the rebellious Israelites:

---

<sup>10</sup> "The darkness which covered the Egyptians, and the light which shone upon the Israelites, were types of the wrath and grace of God." (Hengstenberg; quoted in Keil) "The Israelites must have acquired new cheerfulness when they recognized in the sun's brightness that God's paternal countenance was shining upon them; for He then enlightened them with His favour." (Calvin)

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Psalm 97:11–12; Mic. 7:8; Ps. 18:28; 112:4

- ✓ Isaiah 8:22 — They will look to the earth, but behold, distress and **darkness**, the **gloom** of anguish... they will be thrust into thick **darkness**. (*apelah*)

So why then, here in Exodus 10, should the Israelites have light when all the rest of Egypt was in darkness? The Lord said to Moses, “Stretch out your hand toward heaven, that **there may be darkness over the land**.” Remember how these words echoed the words in Genesis one, “The earth was without form and void, and **darkness was over** the face of the deep”? Well, these words also point us forward to another time of darkness – not three days, this time, but three hours. As Matthew describes what happened as Jesus was hanging on the cross, he practically quotes word for word from Exodus chapter ten:

- ✓ Matthew 27:45–46 (cf. Mark 15:33; Luke 23:44)<sup>12</sup> — Now from the sixth hour **there was darkness over all the land**<sup>13</sup> until the ninth hour. And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” that is, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Jesus experienced the terrors of darkness—of a darkness that you and I have never, ever known and can never, ever imagine—so that we might be *spared* – so that Isaiah’s prophecy might be fulfilled:

- ✓ Isaiah 9:1–2 (cf. Mat. 4:12-16) — There will be *no gloom* for her who was in anguish... The people who walked in **darkness** (*hosek*) have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone.
- ✓ Isaiah 29:18 — In that day... out of their **gloom** (*opel*) and darkness (*hosek*) the eyes of the blind shall see.

## Conclusion

Why does the sun rise every morning and shed its light on us? It’s only because the mercies of God are renewed every morning. (cf. Lam. 3:22-23; Mat. 5:45) But this light of day that we all enjoy, and so often take for granted, it’s really just a wonderful picture of the **light** of the Gospel that’s been shed abroad in all our hearts.

- ✓ 2 Corinthians 4:6 — For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” [—and the God who gave light to the Israelites when all the rest of Egypt was covered in darkness—this God] has shone in *our hearts* to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

Jesus said:

---

<sup>12</sup> Micah 3:6 — Therefore it shall be night to you, without vision, and **darkness** (*hsk*) **to you**, without divination. The sun shall go down on the prophets, and the day shall be **black over (al) them**.

Ezekiel 32:1, 7-8 — In the twelfth year, in the twelfth month, on the first day of the month, the word of the LORD came to me... When I blot you [Pharaoh/Egypt] out, I will cover the heavens and make their stars dark; I will cover the sun with a cloud, and the moon shall not give its light. All the bright lights of heaven will I make **dark over (al) you**, and put **darkness** (*hosek*) **on your land**, declares the Lord GOD.

<sup>13</sup> The Greek translation (Septuagint) of Exodus 10:21 is “*ginomai skotos epi ge*” (“that there may be darkness over the land”) Matthew writes: “*skotos ginomai epi pas ho ge*” (“there was darkness over all the land”).

- ✓ John 8:12 — I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.
- ✓ John 12:46 — I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness.

We praise and worship God because He has not *left* us in our darkness and blindness where we could not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ! (cf. 2 Cor. 4:4; Luke 1:76-79) He has *saved* us from all the terrors of darkness. So then:

- ✓ Ephesians 5:8–11 — Walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them.
- ✓ 1 Thessalonians 5:5–6, 8–9 — For you are all children of light, children of the day. We are not of the night or of the darkness. So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober... since we belong to the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.
- ✓ Matthew 5:14–16 (cf. Phil. 2:14-15) — You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.
- ✓ 1 John 1:7 — If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.