

Text: Exod. 10:21-29

Title: "Plague 9: Pharaoh's darkness"

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Introduction: Michael Faraday and James Clerk Maxwell are the two men in the history of science most responsible for our ability to understand what we do today about the physical properties of light.

A 19th century scientist, Faraday served as the Director of the Royal Institution in London, a multidisciplinary scientific research laboratory. One science historian remembers Faraday as "the greatest experimental scientist of all time." He calculates that had he lived in the days of the Nobel prize in science, Faraday would have won eight of these.

One of Faraday's discoveries made him the main architect of the classical field of electromagnetism. He discovered that moving a magnet near a wire can generate an electric current in a wire. And this discovery, together with the knowledge that an electric current can disturb a magnetic compass, later led James Clerk Maxwell to characterize electromagnetism as waves.

Maxwell too was brilliant. Einstein said that Maxwell changed the world forever because he theorized that electromagnetic waves travel at the speed of light, which led to the conclusion that light itself is a form of electromagnetic radiation or a wave.

Neither Faraday nor Maxwell would have been able to explain scientifically what happened in Egypt when God sent the darkness of the ninth plague of this passage. But what we know about these two men tells us that they were both

Bible believers who would have accepted by faith the existence of the supernatural God of the Bible, who is able to do what we are told He did.

Faraday was known for speculating about scientific topics and afterwards running into his laboratory to test his speculations. While on his deathbed, a well-meaning friend of his, trying to take his mind off the trial of the hour, kindly asked, "Sir Michael, what speculations have you now?" Faraday replied: "Speculations, man, I have none! I have certainties. I thank God that I don't rest my dying head upon speculations, for I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day."

Maxwell was a contemporary of Charles Darwin and a member of the science faculty at Cambridge. He was once invited to join other scientists on the Italian Riviera to discuss new developments in science and how they related to the Bible. Maxwell declined, explaining that because scientific hypotheses change much more quickly than biblical interpretations, "founding the latter on the former might keep a hypothesis in circulation long after it should have been rejected."

The Cambridge scientist James Clerk Maxwell wrote in June of 1864: "Think what God has determined to do to all those who submit themselves to his righteousness and are willing to receive his gift [the gift of eternal life in Jesus Christ]. They are to be conformed to the image of His Son, and when that is fulfilled, and God sees they are conformed to the image of Christ, there can be no more condemnation" [Henry Schaeffer III, "Science and Christianity: Conflict or Coherence?" in *Reading God's World*, ed. Angus J. L. Menuge; pp. 135-137].

I mention the faith of these men simply to point out that the two figures who were the most instrumental in discovering the scientific properties of light would have had no issues with the real truthfulness of our simple biblical conclusion this morning, that the God who first said, "Let there be light," could also say to Pharaoh in the context of this ninth plague, "there shall be darkness."

Clearly, doing what He wants with the physical properties of light is no challenge for its Creator. Instead, He is focused on a challenge of a different kind. The Lord uses this plague of darkness to deal with the challenge of Pharaoh's darkness in this passage. Because Pharaoh dwelt in a darkness of one kind already, the Lord decides to add another kind of darkness to his life for three days, which was designed to forebode the last plague and to give Pharaoh one more merciful chance to escape his darkness, before it was too late. Notice with me from the passage three things about Pharaoh's darkness.

I. Pharaoh's darkness was the total removal of visible light (vv. 21-23).

Illustration: I read an informative article published by *Wired* magazine titled, "Five Things Every Human Should Know About Light." The article notes a common answer to a question about darkness. It asks, "What do you see when a room goes dark?" The answer is that everything goes black. Then it asks, "What happens after you wait a while?" The answer normally given is that your eyes adjust and you are able to see some things in shadow. The magazine explains that our eyes adjust that way because we are not actually in total darkness. When our eyes can adjust, it means that we are in a room that still has some light in it.

Application: The darkness of this plague would be the total removal of visible light. No one's eyes would be able to adjust. The phrase in verse 22 translated *thick darkness* utilizes in the original the two Hebrew words for *darkness*. It is as though the Lord, who knows that normally there is a mixture of some light with dark in darkness here says that this darkness would be exclusively the dark part of darkness. We are told three things about this darkness.

1. The darkness was completely debilitating (vv. 21, 23). At times we get hit with such a darkness that our reflex is to put our hands up immediately and grope forward with our hands outward trying to feel our way. That is what is meant in verse 21 by *a darkness that can be felt*. There would be a lot of groping. Verse 23 describes how debilitating the darkness was. Egypt was brought to a complete standstill. We might say that it experienced an immediate shutdown.

With COVID-19 we have gotten just a taste of what a societal shutdown feels like. The fear of pandemic has been debilitating for our world. Who is responsible for the shutdown? As the list of answers forms in your mind to that question, is the Lord on the list? I believe He should be on the top of it. What is the Lord trying to tell us, our family, our church, and our nation by allowing so much of our lives to be debilitated? Perhaps one thing we might learn is that some things are more important than others in the eyes of the Lord, and too often our affections have been set on the unimportant things. The Lord is in control of everything out of our control, and so much more. Our response to the debilitating effects of pandemic fear in our society needs to remember that the God of providence has done this.

2. The darkness was carefully discriminatory (v. 23b). What a reminder this is that God graciously deals with His people differently than He deals with the unbeliever. Abraham

prayed that God would spare the city to save a few righteous. God answers such prayers. We can pray them for our land. Do we? I must say that our church gatherings that do are very poorly attended, but I am thankful that every prayer counts. Keep praying. Pray more together.

3. The darkness was for three days (v. 22). Three days of darkness would precede the final judgment of Israel's enemy Egypt. Jesus spoke of the three days of darkness after His crucifixion, which would precede the final victory over the last enemy of the sinner – death. Remember how Pilate's soldier remembered what Jesus had said?

Matt. 27:63-66: "Saying, Sir, we remember that that deceiver said, while he was yet alive, After three days I will rise again. Command therefore that the sepulcher be made sure until the third day, lest his disciples come by night, and steal him away, and say unto the people, He is risen from the dead: so the last error shall be worse than the first. Pilate said unto them, Ye have a watch: go your way, make it as sure as ye can. So they went, and made the sepulcher sure, sealing the stone, and setting a watch."

These men wanted the darkness to continue far longer than the three days the Lord had in mind. They wanted to live forever in that darkness, the darkness of a crucified but not risen Christ. Perhaps that matches the unbelief of your own heart. Rather than believing that Christ rose bodily from the tomb and recognizing what this means about all His claims upon you, your unbelief has endeavored to seal Him in there so that the darkness could continue. "And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil" (John 3:19). Do you love darkness? Is this the reason for your unbelief? Pharaoh's darkness was the removal of

visible light. It was debilitating, discriminating, and its duration was three days.

II. Pharaoh's darkness was materialism (vv. 24-26a).

Illustration: Sunglasses are supposed to help us see by blocking the light. Last week in Kansas City, the sun glasses of Jordan Luplow, the left fielder for the Cleveland Indians baseball team, blocked so much light that he almost got hit in the head with a fly ball that he should have caught for a routine out. Perhaps he would have made the play better without the sunglasses that time.

Application: In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus spoke of two masters that compete for our service. On the one hand there is God, the rightful object of our love and worship. But on the other hand, there is money (mammon), what we might call *materialism*. Jesus spoke of the struggle for the heart of man as a contest between these two competitors (Matt. 6:19-33). In verses 22-23, Jesus explains how materialism can become a form of darkness for us. It is as though we are dazzled with all that we can see with the glasses of materialism, but those glasses create a dark blind spot that is going to find us a fool the night our soul is required of us. The ball is coming, and it is going to hit us in the head.

Pharaoh agrees to let Moses and the rest of the Israelites go for worship, but he demands that the livestock remain behind. Why would he do that? Remember that Pharaoh's livestock had been largely destroyed by this time, so it is not difficult to surmise that he had plans for keeping some of those possessions for himself. He wanted them where he could see them for that reason. No man can serve two masters. We have to choose Christ or money. What percentage of those who miss church this morning will do so because

they are serving money? What do we love more, even when the offering plate is passed – Christ and His kingdom or money? Jesus was clear about what we need to do: “But seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added unto you.” Pharaoh’s darkness was materialism. Is it ours as well?

III. Pharaoh’s darkness was self-made religion (vv. 26b-29).

Illustration: I was saddened to read the latest “From the Pulpit” article in the *New Boston Beacon*. It saddened me because it made clear that its author does not understand what Jesus meant when He said, “Ye must be born again.” Nicodemus did not understand it either, but today rather than inquiring further of Scripture and Christ for clarification, men go on to make the phrase mean whatever they want it to mean. The false gospels of modern self-made religions are dangerous error that we must endeavor to expose and correct.

Application: There is a stark difference between Moses’s religion and that of Pharaoh in this passage. Moses’s religion was based on “Thus says the Lord”; Pharaoh’s was based on “This is what I say.” Moses’s was based on “we do not know what is best”; Pharaoh’s was based on “I know what is best for me.” Moses’s was based on “Will the face of the Lord be pleased?”; Pharaoh’s was based on “I am not pleased to have you before my face.” Moses was weak enough to trust the Lord when threatened by Pharaoh; Pharaoh was strong enough to do the threatening, strong because the Lord had hardened his heart.

As the true religion and the false religion clash in this passage, the false offers a deal. Did you notice Moses’s response? “Not a hoof.” That must be our testimony in a

world of soul-destroying lies when we are tempted to compromise with and tolerate those lies – “not a single hoof!” As servants of the true God and ministers of the true gospel, we will not receive praise from men, but we will from God (Rom. 2:29).

Conclusion: I think we have the second saddest phrase in Scripture recorded in the last verse of our passage, “You shall no more see my face.” There is a sadder one that shall come from the lips of Jesus to many someday: “Depart from Me . . . I never knew you” (Matt. 7:23). Does Jesus know you this morning? Have you come from the darkness to the light of the Lord? Is Pharaoh’s darkness of materialism and self-made religion still your darkness?

The cross is the bridge from darkness to light. The Crucified One is risen, He died for your sins, and if you ask Him to save you from your darkness, He will.

“A man came—I think it was actually in Philadelphia—on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, ‘Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.’ That is the distinction—the sermon, and the ‘lightning and the thunder.’ To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters.”

—David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

*Preachers and Preaching*