

Homiletics Analysis: Exodus 10

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Exodus 10 records the seventh and eighth plagues against Egypt — locusts and darkness — together with the intensifying negotiation between Moses and Pharaoh that surrounds them. The chapter opens with a remarkable divine disclosure: the LORD tells Moses explicitly that He has hardened Pharaoh's heart so *that* Israel will have testimony to pass to their children and grandchildren (vv. 1–2). This is not divine frustration — it is divine choreography. The locust plague is announced with full warning (vv. 3–6), Pharaoh's officials urge capitulation (vv. 7–8), and a partial negotiation collapses when Pharaoh refuses to let the women and children go (vv. 9–11). The locusts come (vv. 12–15), are so severe they cover the face of the ground and darken the land, and Pharaoh rushes to confess — yet again superficially (vv. 16–17). The LORD removes the locusts (v. 19), but again hardens Pharaoh's heart (v. 20). The darkness plague follows without warning — a thick, palpable darkness that can be *felt*, lasting three days, while the Israelites have light in their dwellings (vv. 21–23). Pharaoh offers his final compromise — go, but leave your livestock — which Moses refuses (vv. 24–26). The chapter closes with the LORD hardening Pharaoh's heart a final time, Pharaoh threatening Moses with death, and Moses agreeing they will not meet again (vv. 27–29).

This Text — Intent

God is pressing two simultaneous claims through this chapter: one toward Egypt (and its representative, Pharaoh), and one toward Israel (and the generations that will follow). Toward Pharaoh and Egypt, the escalating plagues expose the total impotence of Egypt's gods, its king, and its self-styled power. Toward Israel — and this is the explicit framing God Himself gives in verses 1–2 — the purpose is *testimony for the generations*: so that you will tell your children and grandchildren what God did in Egypt, and you will know that I am the LORD. The intent of this passage is to call every reader to recognize that the LORD governs all things — including the resistance of His enemies — for the sake of His people's knowing Him and declaring Him. God is not reacting to Pharaoh; He is *using* Pharaoh. The reader is to be undone by the sovereignty and purposefulness of God, and moved to transmit the knowledge of this God to the next generation.

Subject Sentence: The LORD uses Pharaoh's hardened resistance to build testimony for the generations.

Primary Claim: God sovereignly orchestrates even the defiance of His enemies so that His people will know Him more deeply and declare Him more faithfully — and this claim demands that every believer take up the generational responsibility of passing that testimony on.

Interpretive Evaluation

The hardening of Pharaoh's heart is the most significant interpretive issue in Exodus 10 — and in the plague narrative as a whole. Three positions require evaluation.

The *Arminian/Wesleyan* reading typically argues that God's hardening is a *judicial response* to Pharaoh's own prior self-hardening — God confirms and intensifies what Pharaoh has already chosen. This reading preserves human libertarian freedom and avoids what is perceived as the implication that God renders Pharaoh culpable for a condition God produced. The reading has textual support: Pharaoh does harden his own heart in several instances (Exodus 8:15, 32). However, Exodus 10:1 explicitly states that God has hardened Pharaoh's heart *before* the negotiations of this chapter begin, and God's stated purpose is His own glory and Israel's testimony — not a response to Pharaoh's choices. The Arminian reading, at best, partially accounts for the data. It cannot comfortably accommodate God saying *I have hardened his heart so that I may perform these signs and so that you may tell your children* (vv. 1–2). **Verdict: Qualify.** The observation that Pharaoh also hardens his own heart is textually valid and worth retaining; but making this the *primary* frame for the hardening — as if God were merely ratifying what Pharaoh had already chosen — fails to account for God's own explicit framing of His purpose in verse 1.

The *dispensational* reading tends to emphasize the national/covenantal dimension: these plagues are God's judgment on Egypt as a nation-state in the context of His covenant purposes for Israel as a nation. The darkness over Egypt versus light in Goshen (v. 23) is read as a sharp Israel/nations distinction. This reading is textually attentive and captures something real — the distinction between Goshen and Egypt is significant and should not be flattened. However, the dispensational tendency to confine the passage's force to a specific national/prophetic moment can resist the applicational reach the passage itself invites in verses 1–2, where God explicitly frames the events as testimony *for all generations of Israel's children*. **Verdict: Acknowledge and qualify.** The national/covenantal dimension is real; but the generational testimony frame opens the text's application beyond its immediate historical moment.

The *Reformed* reading holds that God's hardening of Pharaoh is a sovereign, purposeful act — not a reaction — rooted in God's absolute freedom to have mercy on whom He will and to harden whom He will (as Paul argues directly from this passage in Romans 9:14–18). God is not unjust; Pharaoh is culpable because he acts in accordance with his own desires. But God is the first cause: He has raised Pharaoh up and hardened him *for this purpose* — so that God's power would be displayed and His name proclaimed in all the earth. Exodus 10:1–2 makes this framing explicit in the narrator's own voice before the chapter's action

begins. This is not incidental — it is the hermeneutical key the text itself provides. The Reformed reading takes that key seriously. **Verdict: The text supports the Reformed reading as the reading that accounts for the whole — the hardening as sovereign act, the purpose as glory and testimony, the result as Israel’s multi-generational knowledge of the LORD.**

The darkness plague raises a secondary interpretive question: is the three-day darkness a natural phenomenon (perhaps a *khamasin* sandstorm or similar event) given supernatural timing and intensity? Some interpreters press the naturalistic explanation. The text’s language — darkness that can be *felt* (v. 21), that is *thick* — suggests something that transcends natural meteorological events, and the contrast with light in Goshen (v. 23) is not easily explained by naturalistic accounts. The Reformed reading does not need to adjudicate every natural/supernatural distinction, but it should resist readings that so naturalize the plagues that the confrontation with Egypt’s sun-god religion (Re/Ra) is lost. The darkness that falls on the land of the sun-god, leaving Israel illuminated, is theologically pointed and should be named as such.

Key Canonical Support

- **Romans 9:14–18** — Paul quotes Exodus 9:16 and Exodus 10:1 directly to argue that God’s hardening of Pharaoh demonstrates His absolute sovereign freedom in mercy and judgment; the Exodus 10 framework is the Old Testament anchor for Paul’s doctrine of divine sovereignty.
- **Psalms 78:1–8** — The psalmist’s call to declare God’s works to the next generation echoes the generational testimony purpose God explicitly states in Exodus 10:1–2; the generational transmission of the knowledge of God is not incidental but is one of the exodus narrative’s central aims.
- **Exodus 9:16** — God’s own stated purpose one chapter earlier — “*for this purpose I have raised you up, to show you my power, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth*” — establishes the theological frame that Exodus 10:1–2 extends and personalizes as generational testimony.
- **John 9:1–3** — Christ’s reframing of the man born blind (“that the works of God might be displayed”) echoes the same sovereign purposefulness: God incorporates what looks like tragedy, resistance, or darkness into the display of His glory; the Exodus pattern extends into the New Testament.
- **Deuteronomy 6:20–25** — The commanded transmission of Exodus testimony to children (“when your son asks you in time to come, ‘What is the meaning of the testimonies...’”) is the liturgical fulfillment of what God explicitly designs in Exodus 10:2; the generational chain of witness is both commanded and grounded in what God does in Egypt.

Aim: To show from Exodus 10 that God’s sovereignty over even the most stubborn resistance is not merely a theological proposition to be affirmed but a testimony to be received, treasured, and passed on — and to call readers to take up that generational responsibility concretely.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1–2	The LORD discloses His purpose to Moses: He has hardened Pharaoh’s heart <i>so that</i> these signs would be performed and <i>so that</i> Israel would have testimony to tell their children and grandchildren, and know that He is the LORD	Hermeneutical key to the chapter — God provides His own interpretation of the events before they unfold; “played havoc” (<i>hithalalti</i>) — to make sport of, to deal severely with
3–6	Moses and Aaron confront Pharaoh: “How long will you refuse to humble yourself before me?” Warning of locusts — unprecedented in intensity, filling houses, covering the ground	“How long will you refuse to humble yourself?” — the theological indictment beneath the plague
7–8	Pharaoh’s officials plead with him to let the people go: “Do you not yet understand that Egypt is ruined?” Pharaoh calls Moses and Aaron back — appears to capitulate	Even Pharaoh’s own court recognizes the trajectory; Pharaoh’s concession is still conditional and controlling
9–11	Moses insists all Israel — men, women, children, livestock — must go; Pharaoh refuses, permits only the men to go; Moses and Aaron are driven out	Pharaoh’s repeated half-concessions reveal his strategy: grant partial release, retain leverage; Moses accepts no partial deal
12–15	The LORD commands Moses to stretch out his hand; locusts come, cover	“So that there remained nothing green in the trees or in the plants of the field” —

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	the land, eat everything the hail had left; unprecedented in the history of Egypt	total devastation of agricultural Egypt
16–17	Pharaoh summons Moses and Aaron quickly, confesses sin against the LORD and against Moses, asks forgiveness and intercession	Pharaoh’s confession is verbal and tactical — the speed of his confession and its connection to removal of the plague betrays its superficiality
18–20	Moses intercedes; the LORD drives the locusts into the Red Sea — not one locust remains in Egypt; the LORD hardens Pharaoh’s heart and he does not let Israel go	The cycle: plague → superficial confession → intercession → removal → hardening; God’s sovereignty is explicit at the end
21–23	The LORD tells Moses to stretch out his hand; thick darkness covers Egypt for three days — darkness that can be felt; no one moves; but Israel has light in their dwellings	“Darkness that could be felt” — language of palpable, oppressive, supernatural darkness; contrast with Goshen is stark; confrontation with Re/Ra implicit
24–26	Pharaoh’s final compromise: go, but leave your livestock; Moses refuses — they need the livestock to worship, and they don’t know yet what God will require	“We do not know with what we must serve the LORD until we arrive there” — Moses will not commit to a predetermined worship agenda on Pharaoh’s terms
27–29	The LORD hardens Pharaoh’s heart; Pharaoh threatens Moses with death if he appears again; Moses agrees — “you are right, I will not see your face again”	The relationship is fully broken; the final confrontation (chapter 11–12) is imminent; Pharaoh has sealed his own doom

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–2	God’s Purpose Declared:

Division	Verses	Label
		Signs for Testimony, Testimony for the Generations
2	3–11	Plague Seven Announced: The Collapse of Negotiation
3	12–20	Plague Seven Unleashed: Locusts, Confession, and Renewed Hardening
4	21–23	Plague Eight: Darkness That Can Be Felt — Egypt Darkened, Israel Illuminated
5	24–29	Final Collapse: No Compromise, Pharaoh's Threat, Moses' Departure

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: The LORD uses Pharaoh's hardened resistance to build testimony for the generations.

Primary Claim: God sovereignly orchestrates even the defiance of His enemies so that His people will know Him more deeply and declare Him more faithfully — and this claim demands that every believer take up the generational responsibility of passing that testimony on.

Applications (Five)

1. Reframe what looks like God's delay as God's design. (*Mind/belief*) Pharaoh's repeated refusals look, from the inside, like God's plan failing. Exodus 10:1–2 reveals that they are God's plan *succeeding* — each refusal is another sign, another layer of testimony, another opportunity for God to demonstrate His power over an empire that stood against Him. When the believer faces prolonged resistance, unanswered prayer, or a situation that seems stuck, the reflex is to conclude that God has either forgotten or is unable. This passage refuses that conclusion. God tells Moses His purpose *before* the events unfold — not because the events are out of control, but because they are precisely controlled. The discipline here is to ask not “why hasn't God acted yet?” but “what is God building that requires this particular sequence?”

2. Feel the weight of the darkness you have been delivered from. (*Affections/worship*) The darkness of plague eight is not merely meteorological — it is theological. Egypt, the

civilization built around the worship of Re, the sun-god, sits in three days of impenetrable, palpable darkness. Israel has light. The contrast is not incidental; it is the visual sermon God preaches over the whole narrative. The believer who has been transferred from darkness to light (Colossians 1:13) should not have a merely academic relationship to that transfer. Exodus 10:21–23 is designed to produce a visceral sense of what darkness is — not just the absence of sun, but the absence of God — and to kindle genuine gratitude for the light that the LORD provides to His people while the world sits in darkness. Worship that does not feel the weight of the darkness from which it has been redeemed will be thin and perfunctory.

3. Refuse every partial deal that retains leverage over your allegiance to God.

(Will/behavior) Pharaoh's negotiating strategy throughout Exodus 10 is consistent: he offers partial concessions designed to retain control. The men may go, but not the women and children. The people may go, but not the livestock. Each compromise is a bid to stay connected to what Israel owes him — to remain lord over some portion of Israel's life and worship. Moses refuses every partial deal. The believer faces the same negotiation — not with Pharaoh but with every competing lord that offers partial release: "You can follow God, but keep this one area back. Keep this financial arrangement. Keep this relationship as it is. Keep this habit private." Moses' refusal is the pattern: nothing is negotiated, nothing is left behind, nothing is held in reserve. The whole person — mind, affections, family, vocation, possessions — crosses over. Identify the Pharaoh-compromise you have accepted and name it as what it is.

4. Own the generational testimony God has given you and pass it on. *(Will/behavior)*

Exodus 10:2 is startling in its explicitness: God designs the entire plague sequence *so that you may tell your children and your grandchildren what I have done in Egypt*. The plagues are not merely rescue events — they are *testimony-generating events*, deliberately structured to be told and retold. The believer who has witnessed God's faithfulness in their own life — through hardship, through unanswered prayer, through deliverance, through sustained grace — carries a testimony that was designed by God to be transmitted, not retained. The failure to tell the next generation what God has done is not merely a missed opportunity; it is a failure to fulfill the purpose for which God gave the testimony. Name one specific act of God in your life or family. Tell it to someone younger than you this week.

5. Let God's sovereignty over His enemies produce rest, not anxiety, in you.

(Affections/worship) The chapter opens with God in complete control — not surprised by Pharaoh, not frustrated by Pharaoh, not scrambling to respond to Pharaoh. He has hardened Pharaoh's heart. He knows what Pharaoh will do. He knows what comes next. He has already framed the purpose. The believer who lives under the pressure of powerful opposition — in culture, in institutions, in family — is tempted to treat those opposing forces as sovereign, as though their power were ultimate and their victory plausible. Exodus 10 says otherwise. God is not nervously watching Pharaoh. He is using Pharaoh. The posture this should produce is not passivity but *rest* — the rest of a person who knows that the God who hardened the mightiest king on earth for His purposes has not lost track of the opposition you face.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Exodus 10 is one of the most theologically direct statements in the Old Testament of God's sovereign purposefulness in history. God does not merely permit Pharaoh's resistance — He has hardened Pharaoh's heart and engineered the extended confrontation *for a purpose He names explicitly*: the multiplication of signs, the knowledge of His own people, and the generational transmission of testimony. This establishes that God's sovereignty is not a background doctrine but a governing reality that shapes how Israel is to interpret every event — including events that look like divine inaction or divine failure. The darkness plague adds a second theological weight: in a civilization structured around the worship of the sun-god, God darkens the sun over the very people who worship it while illuminating Israel. He is not merely more powerful than Egypt's gods — He exposes them as nothing. The plagues are a systematic dismantling of the Egyptian pantheon, and the darkness plague is among the most pointed.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Exodus 10:1–2 is one of the Old Testament's most direct textual anchors for the Reformed doctrine of divine sovereignty in election and providence. Paul cites this passage (via Exodus 9:16) in Romans 9:14–18 to establish that God has mercy on whom He wills and hardens whom He wills — and that this is not injustice but the prerogative of the Creator over the creature. The Reformed reading of Exodus 10 holds that God's hardening of Pharaoh is not a reaction to Pharaoh's prior self-hardening but a sovereign act for a sovereign purpose — and that this purpose is simultaneously the display of God's power, the rescue of His people, and the generation of testimony that will be declared among the nations. This is covenant faithfulness operating through historical sovereignty: God keeps His promise to Abraham (Genesis 15:13–14) by governing the entire Egyptian confrontation, including its apparent delays and failures, to accomplish both rescue and revelation. The Reformed conviction that God governs all things — including the hardest things, the most resistant things, and the most painful things — is not a philosophical abstraction here; it is God's own interpretation of what He is doing in Egypt.

Main Takeaway

God is not reacting to the resistance in your life — He is governing it. The same God who hardened Pharaoh's heart so that Israel would have testimony for their children is working through every stubborn obstacle, every delayed answer, every palpable darkness in your life for a purpose He has already named: that you would know He is the LORD, and that you would tell the next generation what He has done. Take up that testimony. Pass it on.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Preaching the hardening as theological abstraction rather than pastoral comfort.** The hardening of Pharaoh's heart is frequently handled defensively — as a doctrine to be explained and protected from objections rather than a pastoral reality to be proclaimed as comfort. The text presents God's sovereign hardening as *good news for Israel*: it means every resistance is governed, every delay is purposeful, no enemy operates outside God's control. Preachers who spend the sermon defending the doctrine rather than applying it will leave their congregation with a theological puzzle instead of a pastoral anchor.
- **Missing the generational testimony framework (vv. 1–2) as the hermeneutical key.** God provides His own interpretation of the plague narrative in verses 1–2 before the action of the chapter begins. Preachers who rush past this to get to the plagues themselves will miss the passage's own stated purpose and produce a sermon about dramatic divine power without the application God explicitly loads into the frame: *tell your children and grandchildren*. The generational transmission is not a secondary application — it is the stated reason God has designed the narrative.
- **Treating Pharaoh's confessions as genuine repentance rather than tactical negotiation.** Pharaoh confesses twice in the plague narrative (Exodus 9:27 and 10:16–17). Each time, the confession is verbal, rapid, and tied directly to the removal of a plague. It is a prayer for plague relief, not a turning from rebellion. Preachers who present Pharaoh's confessions as examples of incomplete or fragile repentance may inadvertently suggest that the solution is a more thorough emotional investment in the confession. The text presents something different: a man whose heart has been hardened producing verbal outputs that mimic repentance while changing nothing. The pitfall is a moralistic call to "real repentance" without naming what Pharaoh's confessions actually reveal about the human heart apart from grace.
- **Losing the confrontation with Egyptian religion in the darkness plague.** The darkness that falls on Egypt is not merely an inconvenience or a judgment — it is a theological statement aimed at Re, the Egyptian sun-god, and the entire cosmological order Egypt had built around the sun. Three days of impenetrable, palpable darkness over the land of the sun-god while Israel has light is a deliberate theological provocation: the god Egypt trusted cannot hold back this darkness, cannot light the land, cannot deliver. Preaching the plague as merely dramatic or merely punitive without naming the religious confrontation it enacts loses the full force of the text.

- **Accepting or implying the legitimacy of Pharaoh's compromise offers.** Pharaoh's partial concessions in Exodus 10 (go, but without your families; go, but without your livestock) are frequently noted as clever or understandable negotiating positions. They are not. They are bids for continued lordship over Israel's worship. Moses' refusals are not stubbornness — they are theological clarity: the LORD has made no such partial arrangement, and Moses will not accept one on His behalf. Preachers who present Pharaoh's compromises as reasonable middle grounds, even implicitly, undercut the passage's insistence that the LORD tolerates no rivals and accepts no shared sovereignty over His people.
- **Preaching God's sovereignty over Pharaoh without calling the congregation to receive and transmit testimony.** The primary homiletical failure in preaching Exodus 10 is theological thoroughness without generational application. A congregation can leave having been fully persuaded of divine sovereignty and having received no call to action. But Exodus 10:2 makes God's call explicit: *so that you may tell your children and your grandchildren*. The sermon that ends with "God is sovereign" without pressing the question "what testimony has God given you, and to whom have you told it?" has preached the content of the passage but not its intent.