

HANDOUT-Lesson 07-“THREE”

The number “three” has been explained by various scholars as carrying a meaning of completeness¹, beginning/middle/end, sacred matters or just to represent a small number.²

The Scriptures below exclude those in Daniel and Revelation, since that is what we are trying to interpret. They also exclude passages where the number seems to be used exclusively in a literal sense. In researching the Scriptures that use the number “three” in something beyond a literal context, the meaning seems to be very consistent.

- The number always has a dual significance – one of which is literal – three days, three animals, three festivals
- The number is consistently associated with a special or **sacred sign**, usually a contract or covenant.

Sealing the Abramic covenant

Gen 15:5 - Gen 15:9 (NASB) ⁵And He took him outside and said, “Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them.” And He said to him, “So shall your descendants be.” ⁶Then he believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness. ⁷And He said to him, “I am the LORD who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess it.” ⁸He said, “O Lord GOD, how may I know that I will possess it?” ⁹So He said to him, “Bring Me a three year old heifer, and a three year old female goat, and a three year old ram, and a turtledove, and a young pigeon.”

Angels of the Lord announcing the pending birth of Isaac

Gen 18:1 - Gen 18:3 (NASB) ¹Now the LORD appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre, while he was sitting at the tent door in the heat of the day. ²When he lifted up his eyes and looked, behold, three men were standing opposite him; and when he saw *them*, he ran from the tent door to meet them and bowed himself to the earth, ³and said, “My lord, if now I have found favor in your sight, please do not pass your servant by.

Request that Pharaoh allow the Hebrews to worship God

Ex 3:17 - Ex 3:18 (NASB) ¹⁸“They will pay heed to what you say; and you with the elders of Israel will come to the king of Egypt and you will say to him, ‘The LORD, the God of the Hebrews, has met with us. So now, please, let us go a three days’ journey into the wilderness, that we may sacrifice to the LORD our God.’

The plague of locusts

Ex 10:22 - Ex 10:23 (NASB) ²²So Moses stretched out his hand toward the sky, and there was thick darkness in all the land of Egypt for three days. ²³They did not see one another, nor did anyone rise from his place for three days, but all the sons of Israel had light in their dwellings.

Three Perpetual Feast Days to be devoted to the Lord each year

Ex 23:14 - Ex 23:17 (NASB) ¹⁴“Three times a year you shall celebrate a feast to Me. ¹⁵“You shall observe the Feast of Unleavened Bread; for seven days you are to eat unleavened bread, as I commanded you, at the appointed time in the month Abib, for in it you came out of Egypt. And none shall appear before Me empty-handed. ¹⁶“Also *you shall observe* the Feast of the Harvest of the first fruits of your labors *from* what you sow in the field; also the Feast of the Ingathering at the end of the year when you gather in *the fruit* of your labors from the field. ¹⁷“Three times a year all your males shall appear before the Lord GOD.

¹ M.R.DeHaan, *The Romance of Redemption*, Kregel Publications, 1996, p 40

² “Number”, *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, Abingdon Press, p 564

The number of Israelites who were killed to atone for the worship of the golden calf

Ex 32:26 - Ex 32:29 (NASB) ²⁶then Moses stood in the gate of the camp, and said, "Whoever is for the LORD, come to me!" And all the sons of Levi gathered together to him. ²⁷He said to them, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'Every man of you put his sword upon his thigh, and go back and forth from gate to gate in the camp, and kill every man his brother, and every man his friend, and every man his neighbor.'" ²⁸So the sons of Levi did as Moses instructed, and about three thousand men of the people fell that day. ²⁹Then Moses said, "Dedicate yourselves today to the LORD—for every man has been against his son and against his brother—in order that He may bestow a blessing upon you today."

Years fruit is forbidden after a tree is planted

Lev 19:23 - Lev 19:25 (NASB)

²³"When you enter the land and plant all kinds of trees for food, then you shall count their fruit as forbidden. Three years it shall be forbidden to you; it shall not be eaten. ²⁴But in the fourth year all its fruit shall be holy, an offering of praise to the LORD. ²⁵In the fifth year you are to eat of its fruit, that its yield may increase for you; I am the LORD your God.

Three Cities of Refuge to be set up to prevent "bloodguiltiness" before the Lord

Deut 19:4 - Deut 19:10 (NASB)

⁴"Now this is the case of the manslayer who may flee there and live: when he kills his friend unintentionally, not hating him previously—⁵as when a man goes into the forest with his friend to cut wood, and his hand swings the axe to cut down the tree, and the iron head slips off the handle and strikes his friend so that he dies—he may flee to one of these cities and live; ⁶otherwise the avenger of blood might pursue the manslayer in the heat of his anger, and overtake him, because the way is long, and take his life, though he was not deserving of death, since he had not hated him previously. ⁷"Therefore, I command you, saying, 'You shall set aside three cities for yourself.' ⁸"If the LORD your God enlarges your territory, just as He has sworn to your fathers, and gives you all the land which He promised to give your fathers—⁹if you carefully observe all this commandment which I command you today, to love the LORD your God, and to walk in His ways always—then you shall add three more cities for yourself, besides these three. ¹⁰"So innocent blood will not be shed in the midst of your land which the LORD your God gives you as an inheritance, and bloodguiltiness be on you.

Three punishments to atone for taking a census of the people who were to be "numberless"

2 Sam 24:12 - 2 Sam 24:13 (NASB) ¹²"Go and speak to David, 'Thus the LORD says, "I am offering you three things; choose for yourself one of them, which I will do to you."' ¹³So Gad came to David and told him, and said to him, "Shall seven years of famine come to you in your land? Or will you flee three months before your foes while they pursue you? Or shall there be three days' pestilence in your land? Now consider and see what answer I shall return to Him who sent me."

Number of offerings each year in the new Temple

1 Kin 9:24 - 1 Kin 9:25 (NASB)

²⁵Now three times in a year Solomon offered burnt offerings and peace offerings on the altar which he built to the LORD, burning incense with them on the altar which was before the LORD. So he finished the house.

Number of times Elijah called upon the Lord to resurrect the widow's child

1 Kin 17:20 - 1 Kin 17:22 (NASB) ²⁰He called to the LORD and said, "O LORD my God, have You also brought calamity to the widow with whom I am staying, by causing her son to die?" ²¹Then he stretched himself upon the child three times, and called to the LORD and said, "O LORD my God, I pray You, let this child's life return to him." ²²The LORD heard the voice of Elijah, and the life of the child returned to him and he revived.

Number of days the former exiles had to assemble in Jerusalem to repent and make a new covenant with God

Ezra 10:1 - Ezra 10:8 (NASB)

¹Now while Ezra was praying and making confession, weeping and prostrating himself before the house of God, a very large assembly, men, women and children, gathered to him from Israel; for the people wept bitterly. ²Shecaniah the son of Jehiel, one of the sons of Elam, said to Ezra, "We have been unfaithful to our God and have married

foreign women from the peoples of the land; yet now there is hope for Israel in spite of this. ³“So now let us make a covenant with our God to put away all the wives and their children, according to the counsel of my lord and of those who tremble at the commandment of our God; and let it be done according to the law. ⁴“Arise! For *this* matter is your responsibility, but we will be with you; be courageous and act.”

⁵Then Ezra rose and made the leading priests, the Levites and all Israel, take oath that they would do according to this proposal; so they took the oath. ⁶Then Ezra rose from before the house of God and went into the chamber of Jehohanan the son of Eliashib. Although he went there, he did not eat bread nor drink water, for he was mourning over the unfaithfulness of the exiles. ⁷They made a proclamation throughout Judah and Jerusalem to all the exiles, that they should assemble at Jerusalem, ⁸and that whoever would not come within three days, according to the counsel of the leaders and the elders, all his possessions should be forfeited and he himself excluded from the assembly of the exiles.

Number of days Esther asked the Jews to fast and ask for her protection as she broke the law and approached the king

Esth 4:15 - Esth 4:16 (NASB) ¹⁵Then Esther told *them* to reply to Mordecai, ¹⁶“Go, assemble all the Jews who are found in Susa, and fast for me; do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maidens also will fast in the same way. And thus I will go in to the king, which is not according to the law; and if I perish, I perish.”

Number of years Isaiah went naked as a sign to Egypt of their pending captivity

Isa 20:1 - Isa 20:6 (NASB)

¹In the year that the commander came to Ashdod, when Sargon the king of Assyria sent him and he fought against Ashdod and captured it, ²at that time the LORD spoke through Isaiah the son of Amoz, saying, “Go and loosen the sackcloth from your hips and take your shoes off your feet.” And he did so, going naked and barefoot. ³And the LORD said, “Even as My servant Isaiah has gone naked and barefoot three years as a sign and token against Egypt and Cush, ⁴so the king of Assyria will lead away the captives of Egypt and the exiles of Cush, young and old, naked and barefoot with buttocks uncovered, to the shame of Egypt. ⁵“Then they will be dismayed and ashamed because of Cush their hope and Egypt their boast. ⁶“So the inhabitants of this coastland will say in that day, ‘Behold, such is our hope, where we fled for help to be delivered from the king of Assyria; and we, how shall we escape?’”

*Jesus points to Jonah’s three days in the belly of the fish and to his own three days of death as **the only sign** to be given to the Jews*

Matt 12:39 - Matt 12:40 (NASB) ³⁹But He answered and said to them, “An evil and adulterous generation craves for a sign; and yet no sign will be given to it but the sign of Jonah the prophet; ⁴⁰for just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

*Jesus again points to his own three days of death as **the sign** to the Jews of his authority*

John 2:18 - John 2:22 (NASB) ¹⁸The Jews then said to Him, “What sign do You show us as your authority for doing these things?” ¹⁹Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” ²⁰The Jews then said, “It took forty-six years to build this temple, and will You raise it up in three days?” ²¹But He was speaking of the temple of His body. ²²So when He was raised from the dead, His disciples remembered that He said this; and they believed the Scripture and the word which Jesus had spoken.

The number of souls saved at Pentecost and receiving the Holy Spirit (the promised Comforter)

Acts 2:37 - Acts 2:43 (NASB)

³⁷Now when they heard *this*, they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Brethren, what shall we do?” ³⁸Peter said to them, “Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹“For the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself.” ⁴⁰And with many other words he solemnly testified and kept on exhorting them, saying, “Be saved from this perverse generation!” ⁴¹So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls. ⁴²They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴³Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles.

The number of days Saul(Paul) was blinded, thus causing his conversion

Acts 9:8 - Acts 9:9 (NASB) ⁸Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; and leading him by the hand, they brought him into Damascus. ⁹And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

The number of times God asked Peter to eat unclean animals in his dream – to prepare him to accept his calling to witness to the Gentiles

Acts 10:11 - Acts 10:20 (NASB)

¹¹and he saw ^{*} the sky opened up, and an object like a great sheet coming down, lowered by four corners to the ground, ¹²and there were in it all *kinds of* four-footed animals and crawling creatures of the earth and birds of the air. ¹³A voice came to him, “Get up, Peter, kill and eat!” ¹⁴But Peter said, “By no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything unholy and unclean.” ¹⁵Again a voice *came* to him a second time, “What God has cleansed, no *longer* consider unholy.” ¹⁶This happened three times, and immediately the object was taken up into the sky. ¹⁷Now while Peter was greatly perplexed in mind as to what the vision which he had seen might be, behold, the men who had been sent by Cornelius, having asked directions for Simon’s house, appeared at the gate; ¹⁸and calling out, they were asking whether Simon, who was also called Peter, was staying there. ¹⁹While Peter was reflecting on the vision, the Spirit said to him, “Behold, three men are looking for you. ²⁰“But get up, go downstairs and accompany them without misgivings, for I have sent them Myself.”

The number of witnesses that verify God’s promise that Jesus is the Son

1 John 5:5 - 1 John 5:9 (NASB) ⁵Who is the one who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God? ⁶This is the One who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ; not with the water only, but with the water and with the blood. It is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth. ⁷For there are three that testify: ⁸the Spirit and the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement. ⁹If we receive the testimony of men, the testimony of God is greater; for the testimony of God is this, that He has testified concerning His Son.