



## Leviticus - Chapter Ten

### III Leviticus 8:1-10:20 - The Establishment of the Priesthood (continues/concludes)

#### Summary of Chapter Ten

The Lord's acceptance of Aaron's offering in Chapter 9 is followed, on the same day, by an apparent rejection of it, and joy gives way to sorrow.

#### III.c Leviticus 10:1-20 - Nadab and Abihu

Refer to the chapter summary above.

<sup>1</sup> Now Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, each took his censer, put fire in it, and laid incense on it; and they offered unholy fire before the Lord, such as he had not commanded them. <sup>2</sup> And fire came out from the presence of the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord. <sup>3</sup> Then Moses said to Aaron, 'This is what the Lord meant when he said,

“Through those who are near me

I will show myself holy,

and before all the people

I will be glorified.”’

And Aaron was silent.

#### Leviticus 10:1-3

Nadab and Abihu, the eldest of Aaron's four sons, capriciously took censers of their own, put incense in them, and offered unauthorised or unholy fire, literally

strange or foreign fire, before the Lord. The offence lies in their doing it their own way instead of in a way authorised by the Lord, and as a result they were instantly killed. This probably also involved entering, or trying to enter, the Most Holy Place, as confirmed by 16:1-2, after drinking alcohol, indicated by vv.8-11. The point of the story is that God will not allow his holiness to be violated, not even by members of the high priest's family.

And fire came out from the presence of the Lord and consumed them. The same fire that showed forth God's glory in Leviticus 9:24 now showed his judgement of these unfaithful priests.

In the afterglow of the consecration experience, which Nadab and Abihu were part of, these two sons of Aaron sought out their own relationship with God, apart from the revelation granted through Moses. Nadab and Abihu had a legacy of great spiritual experiences:

- They had seen first-hand all the miracles God did in bringing the nation out of Egypt.
- They had heard the voice of God and seen the fire, lightning, smoke, and felt the thunder and the earthquake with the rest of the nation at Mount Sinai.
- They went up with Moses, Aaron, and the seventy elders for a special meeting with God on Mount Sinai (Exodus 24:1-2), where *<<they saw the God of Israel>>*, so: *<<they beheld God, and they ate and drank>>* (Exodus 24:9-11).

Fire is a figure of searching judgement and purification. A Christian's works for Jesus will be judged by fire: *<<the work of each builder will become visible, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each has done. If what has been built on the foundation survives, the builder will receive a reward. If the work is burned, the builder will suffer loss; the builder will be saved, but only as through fire>>* (1 Corinthians 3:13-15), and Jesus is described by John: *<<His head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like a flame of fire>>* (Revelation 1:14). He has eyes of searching judgement and discernment. Many of those who cry out to God, 'send your fire among us' think only of a Leviticus 9:24 fire, without considering the same fire is present to purify and cleanse here in v.2. Truth be known, many believers desperately beg God not to send his fire, so the purity of his judgements will not be known among them. God reads their hearts and not only their pious prayers to send revival fire.

This shows that even a legacy of great spiritual experiences cannot keep a person right with God; only an abiding relationship grounded in the truth of God's Word can.

Such as he had not commanded them. They came in an unauthorised way, coming to God, but demanding to come their own way. Therefore God considered this unholy fire before the Lord. This was a misuse of special incense. This incense was regarded as holy for the Lord: *<<and make an incense blended as by the perfumer, seasoned with salt, pure and holy; and you shall beat some of it into powder, and put part of it before the covenant in the tent of meeting where I shall meet you; it shall be for you most holy. When you make incense according to this composition, you shall not make it for yourselves; it shall be regarded by you as holy to the Lord>>* (Exodus 30:35-37). It was not to be used in someone's experiment with God. Unholy or profane fire was a fire not kindled from the altar of burnt-offering; it was fire not associated with the atoning and redeeming work of sacrifice.

The fire in the altar of burnt-offering was sacred because it was kindled by God himself. Nadab and Abihu offered a fire of their own making. Perhaps they thought that all fire was the same, and the undiscerning may have agreed with them. However, all fire is not the same and there is a huge difference between the fire kindled by God and fire conjured up by man. It should not be forgotten that Satan himself can deceive with fire. In the great tribulation the antichrist and his lieutenant will be able to make fire come down from heaven on the earth in the sight of mankind: *<<It performs great signs, even making fire come down from heaven to earth in the sight of all>>* (Revelation 13:13). They will use this fire to deceive the undiscerning. Worst of all, before the Lord probably means they dared even to go past the veil into the Most Holy Place. Perhaps they thought they had accomplished too much during their time of consecration, and were now worthy to go right in.

They died before the Lord. They may well have been struck down in the Most Holy Place itself.

Through those who are near me I will show myself holy. Many think they can come in their own way before God and do their own thing in his presence. But God demands to be regarded as holy by all those who come near to him. In Christ, people can come before God just as they are but not in their own way!

And before all the people I will be glorified. This is a reminder that God must be glorified in the meetings of his people. The focus must not be on man, on his cleverness, on his insight, or on his ingenuity. Those who fail to glorify God will not be rewarded.

And Aaron was silent or held his peace. He raised no vocal objection against God's justice in the death of his sons; perhaps he was simply dumbfounded. Aaron just saw two of his sons struck down before the Lord. It was natural for him to question or even to lament, but God would not allow it. More important than Aaron's right to grieve was the respect of God's holiness.

<sup>4</sup> Moses summoned Mishael and Elzaphan, sons of Uzziel the uncle of Aaron, and said to them, ‘Come forward, and carry your kinsmen away from the front of the sanctuary to a place outside the camp.’ <sup>5</sup> They came forward and carried them by their tunics out of the camp, as Moses had ordered. <sup>6</sup> And Moses said to Aaron and to his sons Eleazar and Ithamar, ‘Do not dishevel your hair, and do not tear your vestments, or you will die and wrath will strike all the congregation; but your kindred, the whole house of Israel, may mourn the burning that the Lord has sent. <sup>7</sup> You shall not go outside the entrance of the tent of meeting, or you will die; for the anointing-oil of the Lord is on you.’ And they did as Moses had ordered.

#### Leviticus 10:4-7

Come forward, and carry your kinsmen away from the front of the sanctuary to a place outside the camp. Moses would not send a consecrated priest, i.e. Aaron or one of his sons, to carry these dead bodies outside the Tabernacle courts for burial because they were holy and could not touch dead bodies: <<*The Lord said to Moses: Speak to the priests, the sons of Aaron, and say to them: No one shall defile himself for a dead person among his relatives*>> (Leviticus 21:1). The work of burial had to be done instead by these relatives.

Do not dishevel your hair, and do not tear your vestments. This perhaps was the hardest day of Aaron’s life. Two of his sons were dead before him, and he could not even mourn for them. To mourn might have implied, even in the slightest, way that God was wrong in bringing this fire upon Nadab and Abihu, and Aaron or Moses could not communicate this. The ordained priests, who are holy, ought not to mourn even for the death of their family members, especially those who are rebellious before God.

It was a sin for the high priest to tear his clothes in any circumstances and yet this is exactly what Caiaphas did when he had falsely accused Jesus of blasphemy: <<*Again the high priest asked him, ‘Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?’ Jesus said, ‘I am; and “you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power”, and “coming with the clouds of heaven.”’ Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, ‘Why do we still need witnesses? You have heard his blasphemy! What is your decision?’ All of them condemned him as deserving death*>> (Mark 14:61b-64). Yet it was the high priest who deserved death, not Jesus!

The whole house of Israel, may mourn the burning that the Lord has sent. However, God does not want the death of his people to go without their being some lament over the loss of such people to their families and friends.

**You shall not go outside the entrance of the tent of meeting, or you will die.**

Aaron must also have thought, ‘I did worse than this at the golden calf incident; why did God take them?’ But Aaron did that before his consecration as a priest. After his consecration, he and his sons had a greater accountability, i.e. **for the anointing-oil of the Lord is on you.**

<sup>8</sup> And the Lord spoke to Aaron: <sup>9</sup> Drink no wine or strong drink, neither you nor your sons, when you enter the tent of meeting, that you may not die; it is a statute for ever throughout your generations. <sup>10</sup> You are to distinguish between the holy and the common, and between the unclean and the clean; <sup>11</sup> and you are to teach the people of Israel all the statutes that the Lord has spoken to them through Moses.

### **Leviticus 10:8-11**

**And the Lord spoke to Aaron.** This is the only time in Leviticus that God speaks directly to Aaron alone. God delineates three major roles for the priesthood:

1. **To distinguish between the holy and the common** or profane.
2. **To separate the unclean from the clean.**
3. **To teach the people** the laws of God.

**Wine** and **strong drink** are forbidden while priests are ‘on duty,’ presumably so that they can faithfully carry out their responsibilities. This command, coming directly after the death of Aaron’s two sons, seems to indicate they had been drinking alcohol before their foolish actions. Laypeople as well are discouraged from drunkenness in the sanctuary, as confirmed by 1 Samuel 1:12-16.

**You are to distinguish between the holy and the common, and between the unclean and the clean.** The priests are crucial for enabling Israel to live faithfully to the covenant.

**You are to teach the people of Israel all the statutes.** Teaching the people of God was a primary duty of the priests and is a role undertaken by church leaders. The role of teacher is confirmed by Deuteronomy 33:10, Ezra 7:10, Nehemiah 8:1-12 and Malachi 2:6-7.

<sup>12</sup> Moses spoke to Aaron and to his remaining sons, Eleazar and Ithamar: Take the grain-offering that is left from the Lord’s offerings by fire, and eat it unleavened beside the altar, for it is most holy; <sup>13</sup> you shall eat it in a holy place, because it is your due and your sons’ due, from the offerings by fire to the Lord; for so I am commanded. <sup>14</sup> But the breast that is elevated and the thigh that is raised, you and your sons and daughters as well may eat in any clean place; for they

have been assigned to you and your children from the sacrifices of the offerings of well-being of the people of Israel. <sup>15</sup> The thigh that is raised and the breast that is elevated they shall bring, together with the offerings by fire of the fat, to raise for an elevation-offering before the Lord; they are to be your due and that of your children for ever, as the Lord has commanded.

#### Leviticus 10:12-15

Take the grain-offering that is left from the Lord's offerings by fire, and eat it unleavened beside the altar. Now that various offerings have been offered to the Lord, it is the priests' duty and privilege to partake of them, as was previously commanded: <<*Every male among the descendants of Aaron shall eat of it, as their perpetual due throughout your generations, from the Lord's offerings by fire; anything that touches them shall become holy*>> (Leviticus 6:18). What was left over from a grain-offering belonged to the priests, but they could not take it home to eat it. It had to be eaten beside the altar.

But the breast that is elevated and the thigh that is raised, you and your sons and daughters as well may eat in any clean place. These portions of a sacrifice belonged to a priest and to his household. They could be eaten in any clean place, indicating that the priest would bless the location and that nothing had caused it to become unclean, such as those defiled by the presence of an individual who had become ceremonially unclean: For example: <<*Speak to the people of Israel, saying: If a woman conceives and bears a male child, she shall be ceremonially unclean for seven days; as at the time of her menstruation, she shall be unclean*>> (Leviticus 12:2), and: <<*The priest shall examine the disease on the skin of his body, and if the hair in the diseased area has turned white and the disease appears to be deeper than the skin of his body, it is a leprous disease; after the priest has examined him he shall pronounce him ceremonially unclean*>> (Leviticus 13:3).

<sup>16</sup> Then Moses made inquiry about the goat of the sin-offering, and – it had already been burned! He was angry with Eleazar and Ithamar, Aaron's remaining sons, and said, <sup>17</sup> 'Why did you not eat the sin-offering in the sacred area? For it is most holy, and God has given it to you that you may remove the guilt of the congregation, to make atonement on their behalf before the Lord. <sup>18</sup> Its blood was not brought into the inner part of the sanctuary. You should certainly have eaten it in the sanctuary, as I commanded.' <sup>19</sup> And Aaron spoke to Moses, 'See, today they offered their sin-offering and their burnt-offering before the Lord; and yet such things as these have befallen me! If I had eaten

the sin-offering today, would it have been agreeable to the Lord?’  
<sup>20</sup> And when Moses heard that, he agreed.

### Leviticus 10:16-20

Then Moses made inquiry about the goat of the sin-offering, and – it had already been burned! The incident described here takes place on the final day of the installation of the priesthood. Moses discovers that Eleazar and Ithamar have not followed the regulations of sacrifice given by God. It is dramatic because it follows so closely on the offence of Nadab and Abihu. Moses voices his anger; Aaron, however, intervenes on behalf of his two sons. He argues that the events of the day have been so exceptional as to show that it is too dangerous to perform the ritual. Aaron’s defence displays his fear of the holiness of God, which Moses is glad to see in his brother.

It is not easy to burn the sin-offering, and hard to eat it. Burning hard against sin in a judging manner is easy. To sit down with a brother or sister as a fellow sinner and partake of the sin-offering with them means one realises they are no better than them. Only this kind of heart can minister to people. Jesus had this kind of heart, even though he had no sin! He still identified with his people in his humble birth, simple life, baptism, and death. Moses said the sin-offering was given to remove the guilt of the congregation, to make atonement on their behalf before the Lord. That is why he was upset when Aaron did not eat it. But Jesus did ‘eat’ the sin-offering when he stood as a sinner in the place of all other sinners and received the judgement they deserved.

Yet such things as these have befallen me! Aaron did not eat of the sin-offering because he mourned the loss of his sons. Although Aaron was not allowed to do any of the other signs of mourning, it was appropriate that he fast on the day of his sons’ death, and so he did, and Moses was satisfied with this explanation, he was content and agreed.