

Leviticus 10: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Leviticus chapter 10. Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it, and laid incense on it, and offered unauthorized fire before the Lord, which he had not commanded them. And fire came out from before the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord.

Then Moses said to Aaron, This is what the Lord has said, Among those who are near me I will be sanctified, and before all the people I will be glorified. And Aaron held his peace. And Moses called Mishael and Elzaphan the sons of Uziel, the uncle of Aaron, and said to them, Come near, carry your brothers away from the front of the sanctuary and out of the camp. So they came near and carried them in their coats out of the camp, as Moses had said. And Moses said to Aaron and Eliezer and Ithamar his sons, Do not let the hair of your heads hang loose, and do not tear your clothes, lest you die, and wrath come upon all the congregation. But let your brothers, the whole house of Israel, bewail the burning that the Lord has kindled. And do not go outside the entrance of the tent of meeting, lest you die, for the anointing all of the Lord is upon you. And they did according to the word of Moses. And the Lord spoke to Aaron, saying, Drink no wine or strong drink, you or your sons with you, when you go into the tent of meeting, lest you die. It shall be a statute forever throughout your generations. You are to distinguish between the holy and the common, and between the unclean and the clean. And you are to teach the people of Israel all the statutes that the Lord has spoken to them by Moses. Moses spoke to Aaron and to Eliezer and Ithamar, his surviving sons,

Take the grain offering that is left of the Lord's food offerings, and eat it unleavened beside the altar, for it is most holy. You shall eat it in a holy place, because it is your due and your son's due from the Lord's food offerings. For so I am commanded. But the breast that is waved and the thigh that is contributed, you shall eat in a clean place, you and your sons and your daughters with you. For they are given as your due and your son's due from the sacrifices of the peace offerings of the people of Israel. The thigh that is contributed and the breast that is waved, they shall bring with the food offerings of the fat pieces to wave for a wave offering before the Lord, and it shall be yours and your sons with you as a due forever, as the Lord has commanded. Now Moses diligently inquired about the goat of the sin offering, and behold it was burned up. And he was angry with Eliezer and Ithamar, the surviving sons of Aaron, saying, Why have you not eaten the sin offering in the place of the sanctuary, since it is a thing most holy, and has been given to you, that you may bear the iniquity of the congregation to make atonement for them before the Lord? Behold, its blood was not brought into the inner part of the sanctuary. You certainly ought to have eaten it in the sanctuary as I commanded.

And Aaron said to Moses, Behold, today they have offered their sin offering and their burnt offering before the Lord, and yet such things as these have happened to me. If I had eaten the sin offering today, would the Lord have approved? And when Moses heard that, he approved.

In Leviticus chapter 10, the priesthood and the tabernacle have just been consecrated. Seems like the start of a glorious new order, and then something goes terribly wrong.

[3 : 19] There are a number of creation and new creation stories in scripture, and we see many of them being followed by some sort of fall. In Genesis chapter 1 and 2, the earth and mankind are created, and that's followed by a fall in Genesis chapter 3. In Genesis 9, there is a new earth after the flood, and a covenant made with Noah and his sons. That is immediately followed by a fall narrative, as Ham sinfully enters his father's tent and sees his nakedness. In Genesis chapter 16, after God has made a covenant with him, Abram sins by taking Hagar. In Genesis chapter 32, after the gift of the law at Sinai, and the plans being given for the sabbatical tent of the tabernacle, the Israelites sin with the golden calf. In 1 Kings chapter 10, after being given the knowledge of good Neville, building the new Eden of the temple, and being visited by the woman, the Queen of Sheba, Solomon falls by breaking the Deuteronomic law of the king in every particular.

In Leviticus 10, there is another fall narrative, after the blessing of the establishment of the priesthood and the tabernacle, and it has resemblances to some of these other faults. It's a violation of the father's tent, seemingly involving wine, as in the story of Noah and Ham.

It's the taking and giving of something not commanded, leading to expulsion, as in the case of Adam and Eve. Nadab and Abihu offer unauthorised or strange fire. This is presumably fire taken from a profane source, rather than the altar. There is also the possibility that it is a private offering, that they are offering these on their own personal pans, rather than on the pans of the sanctuary that they were supposed to use. They sin by fire, and they are judged by fire.

The fire that consumes them seems to be the fire of God's own presence. In verse 24 of the previous chapter, fire has come out from God's presence to consume the sacrifices on the altar, at the end of this great celebration of Aaron's priesthood being established. The judgement on Nadab and Abihu provokes an appropriate fear of the Lord in the people and the priests. Those who come near to God are in a position of extreme danger, and should not take their duties lightly. And perhaps we are supposed to see something in the similarity between Nadab's name and that of the freewill offering.

Nadab offers a gift on his own terms, but the gift is a trespass. It's violating the boundaries that God has set up. He's giving a gift, but it's not actually a gift that God wants or desires. It may be similar in some ways to the sacrifice of Cain, who gives a tribute offering, but without approaching God in the proper way. He's giving to God and approaching God on his own terms. And this is a violation of the principles of the tabernacle, but also of the freewill offering. There is a time and a place for the freewill offering, but it needs to be in terms that God has established, not on people's own terms.

[6 : 15] To make more sense of this story, we should probably go back to Exodus chapter 24. In Exodus chapter 24, we encounter Nadab and Abihu for the first time. Starting in verse 1, Then he said to Moses, Come up to the Lord, you and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel, and worship from afar. Moses alone shall come near to the Lord, but the others shall not come near, and the people shall not come up with him. And then in verse 9, Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up, and they saw the God of Israel. There was under his feet, as it were, a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness. And he did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel. They beheld God, and ate, and drank. The Lord said to Moses, Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there, that I may give you the tablets of stone with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction. So Moses rose with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up into the mountain of God. And he said to the elders, Wait here for us until we return to you. And behold,

Aaron and Hur are with you. Whoever has a dispute, let him go to them. Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. The glory of the Lord dwelt on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it six days. And on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the midst of the cloud.

Now the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. And Moses was on the mountain 40 days and 40 nights. This is the previous time that we have encountered Nadab and Abihu. And in that story, they are joining Moses and the elders, and Aaron as they go up on the mountain and eat before the Lord. As in the previous two chapters, there is a period of waiting for seven days. And they are waiting for Moses to enter into the presence of the Lord. There is also in that story the devouring fire as the presence of God. And so there are a number of elements that are similar.

We've already noted the way that the tabernacle is a sort of portable Sinai. And here it's being established as the place where they can come into God's presence. But they were held back that last time, and now they seem to want to press forward on their own terms. They ate in the presence of God, and they were not destroyed. But they had to obey God. They had to come on his own terms. And now they want to come on their terms. They want to come to God with strange fire, and they are breaking the requirements that God has given them. Moses gets Elzaphan and Mishael to carry out the bodies, because the anointed priests were not allowed to defile themselves with corpse contact. They have been anointed, and they must not waver from their proper duties. And even more so now, as they see how serious it is to be servants of the Holy God, protecting the people from God's holiness breaking out, and then also being mindful themselves, and ensuring that they do not commit any trespass in the sanctuary. The rationale for the killing of Nadab and Abihu begins to make more sense in the statement that the priests are to distinguish between the holy and the common, the clean and the unclean. Now, the holy and the common, and the clean and the unclean are different things. So the holy and the common is the distinction between those things that are dedicated to God, that belong to God, those things that are set apart for him, and those things that are not. So the priests are holy in a way that the average Israelite is not. But the average Israelite who can worship in God's presence is clean. And those who are outside of the camp, those who are defiled by corpses, those who are defiled by emissions or some other thing, they are unclean. Now, those distinctions overlap to an extent. They can't be broken down into just two distinctions, but there is an overlap between the clean and the common. So clean is not identical with holy. There are some things that are clean, but not holy. The average Israelite who's worshipping can be clean, but they're not holy in the way that the priests are.

Nadab and Abihu had failed to observe these distinctions, and the priests were supposed to teach the Israelites to exemplify these distinctions, in that area where those distinctions mattered most of all.

[10:30] When Nadab and Abihu failed to observe these, God had to uphold the boundary of the holy himself, breaking out with that fire that consumed them. Why the prominence of the prohibition on alcohol here?

Perhaps it may be an indication of what led Nadab and Abihu to sin. Alcohol affects a change of mental state, and people can often mistake that change of mental state with some intoxicating substance, a drug or alcohol, with attaining that higher level of holiness. Many forms of religion involve that change of mental state through intoxicating substances, and using that as a means to get close to God. Israelite religion was not to operate like that. Rather, it was supposed to abstain from that altogether in the service of God.

The holy was not to be sought through changing your state of mind, and taking mind-altering substances. Rather, it required sobriety and seriousness, and a recognition of the need to distinguish, to have your faculties alert and ready to uphold the boundaries that God had set.

And if there was indeed alcohol involved in this particular sin, maybe it reminds us of the sin of the golden calf, where they sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play. That sort of worship, a worship characterized by revelries, by altered states of mind, by inducing ecstasies through dancing and other things like that, that was out. That was not the sort of thing that should characterize the worship of Israel. And in the sin of the golden calf, and in the sin of Nadab and Abihu, I think we're seeing something of the fault with that sort of worship, and how God completely rejects it, and wishes to be approached in a very different manner. The sin of Nadab and Abihu is followed by a crisis with the purification offering. Aaron and his sons were supposed to eat the purification offerings, whose blood was placed on the horns of the outer bronze altar. The ones that were brought into the holy place, with their blood placed on the horns of the golden altar, they were not to eat those. Rather, the flesh of those had to be burnt outside the camp in a clean place. For the sacrifices that were offered on the outer bronze altar, with their blood being placed on that altar, the priests were able to eat that. They took the impurity of the flesh of the purification offering upon themselves and consumed it. Presumably the idea being that their holiness, their holy status, was able to overwhelm the sin and the impurity of the purification offering associated with the average Israelite. A problem came, however, when the priests themselves sinned, or when the people as a company sinned, and then they couldn't eat the sacrifice. Rather, it had to be all burnt up. Now, what seems to have happened here is not that they're just mourning and want to be let off the requirement to eat meat, because it just seems unfitting. There seems to be more going on here than that. Rather, the problem is that once Nadab and

Abihu have died, there is impurity that has not been addressed. And so if they were to eat the sacrifices, they would take an impurity upon themselves that they're not able to take upon themselves, because the sin had been done in the holy place itself. Just as in Genesis chapter 3, the fall is followed by a divine address to the people that deals with the problem. In the chapters that follow, we have laws concerning animals and purity of animals. We have laws concerning childbirth. We have laws concerning the impurity of skin disease, and then also the leprous house and being expelled from that and it being torn down. And then we have laws concerning bodily emissions and the flesh and its pollution. And then finally, we have the day of coverings, coverings being given for the sin and the nakedness of the people. And all of that is connected with the sin of Nadab and Abihu. It's following on from that.

[14 : 26] And it's also following the pattern of Genesis chapter 3. Judgment upon the serpent, judgment upon the woman and her bearing of children, judgment upon the man in his skin, his flesh, and its connection with death. And then finally, offering of coverings for them. And it's the same pattern that's playing out here. There's been a fall, but then God's grace is being spoken into the situation, so that the system can be restored, so that they can relate to him once more. There is something paradigmatic about the sin of Nadab and Abihu. In 1 Kings chapter 12, we see that Jeroboam sets up golden calves for Israel, and he has sons called Nadab and Abijah. The resemblance is quite strong. He resurrects the idolatry that Aaron was involved in, in the incident with the golden calf in chapter 32 of Exodus.

And he also has sons that died before their time, who are involved in his idolatry. Both Aaron and Jeroboam set up altars and ordained feasts of false worship. Both act illegitimately as priests.

And this suggests that in the story of Aaron and his sons, we have a paradigm of false worship that plays out in the later history of Israel. Jeroboam, the son of Nebat, is the one whose idolatry sets the terms for Israel's continued idolatry throughout all its different kings. And so the sin of Aaron and Nadab and Abihu is paradigmatic for the false worship that plagues Israel from the days of the split of the kingdom. It's important that we pay attention to what's going on here, because it will help us to read those later stories. A question to consider. The book of Leviticus is not just about the worship of Israel. It teaches us patterns for our own worship. How can the sin of Nadab and Abihu, and the distinction between the holy and the common, the clean and the unclean, that the priests were supposed to maintain, help us to understand the proper manner of our own worship? What are some of the ways where we might violate these things, as Nadab and Abihu did?