

Leviticus Bible Study #12

For lay leaders and deacons to conduct after the Sunday service, or during a midweek Bible study session.

Leviticus 10:1-20

1 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. **2** And fire came out from before the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD. **3** 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.

4 And Moses called Mishael and Elzaphan, the sons of Uzziel 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.” **5** So they came near and carried them in their coats out of the camp, as Moses had said. **6** And Moses said to Aaron and to Eleazar 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. **7** And do not go outside the entrance of the tent of meeting, lest you die, for the anointing oil of the LORD is upon you.” And they did according to the word of Moses.

8 And the LORD spoke to Aaron, saying, **9** “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. **10** You are to distinguish between the holy and the common, and between the unclean and the clean, **11** and you are to teach the people of Israel all the statutes that the LORD has spoken to them by Moses.”

12 Moses spoke to Aaron and to Eleazar 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. **13** You shall eat it in a holy place, because it is your due and your sons' due, from the LORD's food offerings, for so I am commanded. **14** 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 sons' due from the sacrifices of the peace offerings of the people of Israel. **15** 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.”

16 Now Moses diligently inquired about the goat of the sin offering, and behold, it was burned up! And he was angry with Eleazar and Ithamar, the surviving sons of Aaron, saying, **17** “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? **18** 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.” **19** 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?” **20** And when Moses heard that, he approved.

Introduction

There is a clear pattern that emerges in the Old Testament which almost always plays out the same way beat-for-beat. First, God establishes a place and puts humans in it; then humans commit a sin

which would ruin or destroy that place; then God punishes them and takes action to mitigate the sins of humanity. God creates the universe, Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit, and are thus cast out having had animals killed to cover them.¹ Some time after that, God *re*-creates the world by the process of the Deluge, and institutes a covenant with mankind through Noah; shortly after this mankind attempts to usurp ownership of the world via the Babel incident, and God mitigates the situation by confusing their languages and calling Abraham to begin a new holy nation for the Messiah.² When God ratifies the Covenant with the children of Israel with a celebratory meal,³ the golden calf incident follows,⁴ for which the Levitical system itself serves as a corrective.

Later in Israel's history, this cycle will continue to be observed. God establishes sacred space, men put it at risk through their sin, and then God takes corrective action. This is especially evident with the monarchy stopping the recurring cycle of Judges after the conquest of Canaan.⁵ God gave His approval for the Jerusalem Temple, only to have to split Israel into two kingdoms on account of Solomon's betrayal.⁶ Time does not permit for a thorough accounting of every example in this cycle, but once the pattern is recognized it is unmistakable. God establishes, man ruins, and then God punishes before mitigating the ruin.

The tenth chapter of Leviticus demonstrates this same cycle, but with an encouraging *asterisk* for the reader. Nadab and Abihu are killed as punishment for their use of strange fire, but nothing in particular changes concerning the structure of the new religious observances. Aaron remains high priest, the sacrifices are maintained, and the Tabernacle furnishings are not destroyed. Yet God still enacts mitigating reforms after the incident, namely establishing educational practices. To prevent any repetitions of Nadab and Abihu's failure to show proper reverence, now the priests are to be thoroughly educated, enough to turn forth and educate the people as an additional duty to their sacrificial responsibilities.

While the event itself is a disaster, especially in Aaron being bereft of two of his sons, there is a special encouragement found in this chapter. The Levitical system is shown to be antifragile in nature. Unlike the golden calf incident and other disasters, there is no *new* institution which must be put in place to correct it; so long as one priest survives, religious life in Israel can continue unabated no matter how many others fall by their sin.

Vs.1-7

1 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. **2** And fire came out from before the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD. **3** 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.

4 And Moses called Mishael and Elzaphan, the sons of Uzziel 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." **5** So they came near and carried them in their coats out of the camp, as Moses had said. **6** And Moses said to Aaron and to Eleazar 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. **7** And do not go outside the entrance of the tent of meeting, lest you die, for the anointing oil of the LORD is upon you." And they did according to the word of Moses.

1 Genesis 1-3

2 Genesis 9, 11:1-9

3 Exodus 24:1-11

4 Exodus 32

5 Judges 2:16-19, 1 Samuel 8:4-9

6 1 Kings 8, 11

The nature of Nadab and Abihu's sin is unclear, but there are clues. First, there is no command at this point for the priests to burn incense on anything but the *Altar of Incense*.⁷ This tells us that they were engaging in a ritual that they had made themselves. Second, the word translated as “unauthorized” is זורר,⁸ which has a connotation of foreignness or adulteration, commonly used in a negative sense. Multiple times the term is employed to refer to false gods.¹⁰ What these two men did was not only something God did not command, it is undoubtedly *pagan* in nature. God kills them for this offense, which clearly constitutes a violation of the First Commandment, “you shall have no other gods before Me.” Aaron holds his peace, recognizing the justice of the execution.

Mishael and Elzaphan are tasked with carrying the bodies for ceremonial purposes. Touching a dead body would introduce uncleanness in Aaron or his other sons, requiring a pause in the sacrifices as the men were made ritually clean again. Meanwhile, Aaron and his other two sons are commanded to remain at the entrance of the tent of meeting, being strictly forbidden from the standard mourning process of the time (head unadorned, tearing one's robes, etc.). Moses reminds them of the anointing oil so as to tell them they are still “on the clock” as it were; they do not have the luxury of disobeying God by deviating from their work to mourn.

Vs.8-11

8 And the LORD spoke to Aaron, saying, **9** “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. **10** You are to distinguish between the holy and the common, and between the unclean and the clean, **11** and you are to teach the people of Israel all the statutes that the LORD has spoken to them by Moses.”

The command given to Aaron to not drink when working at the tent of meeting is another context clue as to the reason Nadab and Abihu were killed. It appears to be that both brothers drank heavily, became intoxicated, and decided to perform a pagan ritual in front of the altar. It may have been the case that the brothers would not have done this if they had been sober. Nonetheless, as God says “I will be sanctified” – that is, *shown to be set apart* – it appears that the alcohol only revealed what was in the men's hearts, namely faithlessness. They were only undergoing the ordination process because they *had* to for their father's sake, not out of any special love or devotion to our Lord.

To prevent this from happening again, God institutes new reforms to bolster the priestly institution. First, while it ought to have been an assumed practice, the priests are now *de jure* barred from drinking during their service times. In addition (and far more importantly), the priesthood is now connected with education for themselves and the Israelite laity. This is to say, they must know the Law intimately, to the point of being able to teach others. Everyone in Israel is thus enjoined to internalize everything that God commands, from the ways sacrifices are conducted to the means by which they remain undefiled. The rest of Leviticus, after this chapter, will serve as a fulfillment of this command; its contents will shift to the general education of the Israelites for social and religious matters not covered by the contents of Exodus.

Vs.12-20

12 Moses spoke to Aaron and to Eleazar 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. **13** You shall eat it in a holy place, because it is your due and your sons' due, from the LORD's food offerings, for so I am commanded. **14** But the breast that is waved and the thigh that is contributed you shall eat in a clean place, you and your sons and

7 Leviticus 4:7

8 Transliterated “Zuwr,” Strong's #2114

9 <https://biblehub.com/hebrew/2114.htm>

10 Deuteronomy 32:15-18, Psalm 44:20-21

your daughters with you, for they are given as your due and your sons' due from the sacrifices of the peace offerings of the people of Israel. **15** 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.”

16 Now Moses diligently inquired about the goat of the sin offering, and behold, it was burned up! And he was angry with Eleazar and Ithamar, the surviving sons of Aaron, saying, **17** “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? **18** 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.” **19** 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?” **20** And when Moses heard that, he approved.

Moses reiterates the command for eating sacrifices to Aaron and his remaining sons. This shows the solid nature of the Levitical system; even when crass idolatrous practices cause wrath to break out against Nadab and Abihu, Aaron is *still* the priest and is expected to carry out his duties. God is demonstrating not only His mercy to the sacerdotal family here, but also to all Israel; there will be no mass slaughter of the Levites like there was for Israelites after the golden calf incident, but at the same time even the priests are held accountable. The new order is not a fragile one, but it *is* thoroughgoing in its applications. Thus the Law accounts for the cycle of affront and mitigation without raising the priesthood up too much, as though they were above God's Commandments.

Aaron does have to speak for his refusal to eat though. In what appears to be the first instance of fasting in Scripture, Aaron and his remaining sons afflict themselves so as to show proper penitence for the affront of the strange fire. Since he says that the death of his sons happened to him, he takes some responsibility for however his sons were raised. Since the sin offerings are made for him and his family in accordance with the Law thus far given, he is not performing this fast out of any desire to merit forgiveness. His recognition of the justice of the Lord merits a true expression of contrition. Since he and his sons were barred from mourning Nadab and Abihu, with Israel mourning on their behalf, his fast is performed for purely penitential faith.