

Our God is a consuming fire

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[0 : 00] So, please turn in your Bibles, if you would, to Leviticus chapter 10. You can follow along on the screen if you don't have one, but if you have your own, that'll be better as we come to study it in a few minutes.

Leviticus chapter 10. Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, took their censers, put fire in them and added incense, and they offered unauthorized fire before the Lord, contrary to his command.

So fire came out from the presence of the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord. Moses then said to Aaron, this is what the Lord spoke of when he said, among those who approach me I will be proved holy, in the sight of all the people I will be honored.

Aaron remained silent. Moses summoned Mishael and Elzaphan, sons of Aaron's uncle Uziel, and said to them, Come here, carry your cousins outside the camp, away from the front of the sanctuary.

So they came and carried them, still in their tunics, outside the camp, as Moses ordered. Then Moses said to Aaron and his sons Eliezer and Ithamar, Do not let your hair become unkempt, and do not tear your clothes, or you will die, and the Lord will be angry with the whole community.

[1 : 19] But your relatives, all the Israelites, may mourn for those the Lord has destroyed by fire. Do not leave the entrance to the tent of meeting, or you will die, because the Lord's anointing oil is on you.

So they did as Moses said. Then the Lord said to Aaron, You and your sons are not to drink wine or other fermented drink whenever you go into the tent of meeting, or you will die.

This is a lasting ordinance for the generations to come, so that you can distinguish between the holy and the common, between the unclean and the clean. And so you can teach the Israelites all the decrees the Lord has given them through Moses.

Moses said to Aaron and his remaining sons, Eliezer and Ithamar, Take the grain offering left over from the food offerings prepared without yeast, and present it to the Lord, and eat it beside the altar, for it is most holy.

Eat it in the sanctuary area, because it is your share and your son's share of the food offerings presented to the Lord. For so I have been commanded. But you and your sons and your daughters may eat the breast that was waved and the thigh that was presented.

[2 : 24] Eat them in a ceremonially clean place. They have been given to you and your children as your share of the Israelites' fellowship offerings. The thigh that was presented and the breast that was waved must be brought with the fat portions of the food offerings, to be waved before the Lord as a wave offering.

This will be the perpetual share for you and your children as the Lord has commanded. When Moses inquired about the goat of the sin offering and found that it had been burned, he was angry with Eliezer and Ithamar, Aaron's remaining sons, and asked, Why didn't you eat the sin offering in the sanctuary area?

It is most holy. It was given to you to take away the guilt of the community by making atonement for them before the Lord. Since its blood was not taken into the holy place, you should have eaten the goat in the sanctuary area as I commanded.

Aaron replied to Moses, Today they sacrificed their sin offering and their burnt offering before the Lord. But such things as this have happened to me. Would the Lord have been pleased if I had eaten the sin offering today?

When Moses heard this, he was satisfied. So if you've lost your place in your Bibles, we're in Leviticus chapter 10.

[3 : 42] We're going to be focusing on that chapter this evening. I don't suppose that you would describe really any part of the book of Leviticus as light reading.

Such narrative as there is in the book is really quite slow paced. The whole thing takes place in a single location. And most of the narrative is just a kind of framework around a series of laws and regulations.

It isn't the most immediately gripping reading we should acknowledge. Now the first few verses of chapter 10 do break in to that litany of laws.

Suddenly there is some very dramatic action. But we find ourselves, instead of being uncomfortable that not much is happening, we find ourselves quite uncomfortable for a very different reason.

What could Nadab and Abihu possibly have done to deserve such drastic punishment? We're forced to ask ourselves, if Leviticus is about having fellowship with God, do we really want to have fellowship with the kind of God who behaves like this?

[4 : 47] The kind of God who strikes people down for what looks like really quite a minor violation of his laws, especially since some of those laws seem quite arbitrary to us in the first place.

And this apparent heartlessness of God is further compounded by his insistence in the middle of the chapter that Moses and his remaining sons aren't even allowed to go and mourn for the two who have died.

This isn't easy, is it? As we work our way through this chapter, we have to first recognize that our God is a consuming fire. Our God is a consuming fire.

Secondly, we're then challenged to align ourselves with his attitudes, with his perspective. We're called to align ourselves with God. And then at the end of the chapter, we are reminded of God's grace.

Our God is a consuming fire. We must align ourselves with him. And yet, he is a God of grace. So come with me to the start of the chapter. Our God is a consuming fire.

[5 : 52] Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, took their censers, put fire in them and added incense, and they offered unauthorized fire before the Lord, contrary to his command.

Much ink has been spilled over the precise nature of their offense. Was the fire taken from somewhere other than the altar, the only permitted source of coals for the burning of incense? Was the incense that they chose not the one specified blend? Did they try to go too far into the tabernacle, maybe even behind the veil to the Holy of Holies?

Were they drunk and careless? Some combination of the above. In fact, Jewish rabbis proposed at least 12 different theories to explain why these men died.

An issue with the fire or the incense seems most likely, given the phrase, unauthorized fire. But I think ultimately we have to conclude we don't need to know the precise detail of their offense.

[6 : 52] It boils down to the last phrase of that verse. It was contrary to the Lord's command. It's really all we need to know. And that doing of something contrary to the Lord's command, that comes as a shock to the system.

Because for the past couple of chapters, indeed through the latter half of the book of Exodus, and on through Leviticus so far, over and over again in the descriptions of the various rituals, just like with the construction of the tabernacle, over and over again a section concludes with the words, as the Lord commanded.

And here, contrary to his command. Everything has been done previously in accordance with what he said, and suddenly we have the opposite. He has not commanded this fire to be brought.

And so fire came from the presence of the Lord and consumed them, and they died. See, we can maybe understand a God who rains fire on Sodom and Gomorrah, mired in their sin for year after year.

We can approve of a God who punishes those who commit genocide. We recognize that some patterns of sin are so ongoing, and some sins are so immediately horrifying, that we understand when harsh punishment is meted out.

[8 : 12] But if we're honest, the idea of a severe punishment like this, for what feels like a minor offense, at first blush it sits as unjust, doesn't it? But this isn't the only instance.

The Bible has a series of apparently small sins that cost people greatly. Eating a piece of fruit, looking back at a city, hitting the rock instead of speaking to it, touching the Ark of the Covenant, just to try and stop it falling on the ground, lying about the value of a field that continues on into the New Testament.

We're forced then to conclude, there are no small sins. These sins might seem small to us, but ultimately only because we underestimate the holiness of God.

Our God is a consuming fire. His holiness is absolute. He dwells in unapproachable light. Even the sinless angels, in the presence of God, they cry, holy, holy, holy, and they cover their eyes and their feet.

So overwhelming is the glory, the holiness of God. We're tempted, aren't we? We're tempted to think that God's like us, but just a bit better. A few rungs higher on the ladder of purity.

[9 : 36] And we think, therefore, that he doesn't have much more right to react in this kind of a fashion to such a small thing than you or I would have to react in that way. But the truth is, God's holiness is so absolute.

God's purity is so unadulterated. God's righteousness is so complete that any sin, any misdemeanor, it falls ultimately infinitely far short of his standards.

It is right. It is proper for God to punish sins against his glorious majesty. The fiery death of Nadab and Abihu, this is a foretaste of the fiery death that actually all of us deserve.

This is what our sins merit. Death at God's hand. This fire that they experience is a shadow of the fire that is going to be experienced.

By those whose sins are not covered. God is that holy. Our sins, all of them, are that serious. John Calvin says, if we reflect on how holy a thing God's worship is, then the enormity of this punishment will by no means offend us.

[10 : 53] In other words, however much we're offended by this punishment, however much it sits uncomfortably with us, will we show that by that much, we have not, we have not comprehended the holiness of our God.

And it doesn't get any easier. Verses 4 through 7 don't sit very comfortably either, do they?

You'd imagine, you'd expect that Aaron and his remaining sons, they'd be at the forefront of caring for the deceased, dealing with the bodies, that they would be the lead mourners. But not so.

Instead, the cousins are summoned to take these sinners outside the camp for burial. The pollution must be removed, not only from the tabernacle, but from the whole camp. And Aaron, Eleazar, and Ithama, they are explicitly forbidden from any acts of mourning.

The normal tearing of clothes and so on, this is not to be their practice. It doesn't sound very caring, does it? But God says to them, if they engage in this process of mourning, then the Lord will be angry not just with them, but with the whole community.

[12 : 07] Why? Why are the rest of the camp allowed to mourn, but those who would most wish to do so are forbidden from it? Why? The answer comes in verse 7. Because the Lord's anointing oil is on you.

It's because Aaron is set apart as high priest, and his son set aside alongside him. Because they're called to be holy before God, because that is their role as priests, then for that reason, they're not permitted to mourn.

Because of Aaron's role, and because of the particular circumstances of the death of his sons, he can't join in the mourning. See, his sons have been put to death, not just in the normal course of things.

They haven't died of natural causes. They haven't died in a holy war. No, they have died explicitly because of their own sin.

They've failed to properly respect the God who is a consuming fire, and so they have been duly consumed. And Aaron, Aaron must be seen to approve.

[13 : 14] Aaron has to bring his attitude into line with God's own. Aaron has to accept the judge of all the earth will do right. Indeed, he has done right in this.

Aaron has to accept that his sons deserved to die. Notice, God doesn't demand an absence of mourning from the whole community.

He demands it only of those who are explicitly set apart as his own priests. What's expected of the community at large doesn't go so far as this. But I don't think that means it would be okay for the rest of the community to be looking at what's happening and viewing God's actions as vindictive or unreasonable.

The proper response for all of God's people is to quiet their hearts and acknowledge that God has acted rightly.

The proper response for them isn't to say how vindictive of God to destroy those two, but rather to say how merciful of God that he permits me, that he permits any of us to dwell in his presence.

[14:24] My friends, God is the definition of justice. God is the essence of righteousness. He is perfect in all of his ways.

We are obliged to align ourselves with him. Now, verse 8 and following, God then speaks directly to Aaron.

This is the only time in Leviticus that God does that with Aaron alone rather than Aaron in company with Moses or actually most often God speaks to Aaron through Moses. But now God speaks to him directly.

What a reassurance that must have been to him. What a confidence boost because doubtless he'd be fearing that his son's actions would reflect poorly on him. Maybe he himself would no longer be acceptable before God.

Maybe he's worried that his time as high priest is going to be over before it had fully begun, but no, God speaks directly to him. And whilst the content of what God says is a restriction on the behavior of God's priests, more fundamentally than that, it's a reaffirmation of their role.

[15:38] A setting out again of what they're expected to do. They are to distinguish between the holy and the common, between the unclean and the clean. It is the job of the priest to teach the Israelites what God has decreed.

And it's because of these tasks to which they are called, this distinguishing and this teaching, because of these tasks, they must not drink wine or fermented drink when they go into the tent of meeting, lest they die.

Just like we say, don't drink and drive, so the priests must not drink and serve. They must be above reproach in their approach to the purity of God's tabernacle.

They must be of sound mind as they proclaim his law. We'd do well, wouldn't we, to recognize the importance of a clear head when we're doing significant things. And it's hard to see what could be more significant than leading God's people in worship.

This commandment makes sense. But folks, if you'll permit me a brief aside, there is a cautionary tale in this verse about reading Scripture carefully and being conscious of the presuppositions that we bring to it.

[16:47] It is really quite amazing how many commentators read verse 9, or rather apparently read only the first half of verse 9, and then write at some length about how those who serve God, those who lead in worship, those who want to be God's true followers, that they must never drink wine or spirits.

And by the way, of course, we will all want to follow along that path and refrain. But that's not what verse 9 says. God doesn't say they must never drink. He says they must not do so when they go into the tent of meeting.

Seems to me that those whose cultural background and maybe personal experience predisposes them to read the Bible as prohibiting all drinking, then find that prohibition here.

But it doesn't say that. And given the other positive statements about alcoholic beverages in other places, Psalm 104, wine gladdens the heart, Paul commends wine for Timothy's health, well, an absolute prohibition can't be sustained.

Now, I have to confess, I am predisposed not to find an absolute prohibition here. Some of my ears pricked up when people started proposing that. But my point is this, in this aside, my point is, what are your blind spots and what are mine?

[18:02] What are the things where we're likely to skim over what we read in the Bible because it doesn't fit with what we already think is the case? Where are the places where we're likely to over-interpret and read more than is actually being said?

Folks, on these pages, we have the words of our God who is a consuming fire. Given that, don't you think we should listen to what he actually says rather than hearing something a little bit like what he said?

Anyway, we've recognized God's absolute holiness means no sin can be taken lightly. We've seen the need to align our own sense of right and wrong with God's sense.

But I promised we'd end with a reminder of God's grace. And the second half of this chapter, verse 12 onwards, this is where we find the grace, believe it or not.

It doesn't begin well. With many of the sacrifices, the priests are supposed to eat some or the majority of the sacrifice, and that applies to the goat of the sin offering. But in verse 16, Moses learns that this has not been done, and Moses is understandably angry.

[19 : 13] Now, in the context of what we've just had, it sure seems like we're going to have the same problem again, aren't we? Another group of Aaron's sons have failed to follow another set of God's instructions.

They have acted contrary to his command, haven't they? But listen to verse 19. Aaron replied to Moses, When Aaron says, such things as this have happened to me.

Clearly, this has to be a reference to this judgment, the death of his first two sons. And he's arguing that, given the guilt and disgrace that accrues to the whole family as a result, he argues, how could I possibly perform this sacred rite?

How could we eat this food that we're told is most holy when we ourselves are clearly in no such state? Surely that would be hypocritical. Wouldn't that be to risk eating judgment upon themselves? Furthermore, the eating of this meat, the meat from the sacrifice, it's supposed to be a form of feasting. How could the priests feast inside the tabernacle while outside the walls of the tabernacle the people mourn?

[20 : 37] Quite probably with associated fasting. Surely this is unfeeling unfeeling for them to be feasting whilst others fast. When we see Aaron's reasoning, then we see that his intentions were good.

We see that even if this is technically a violation of God's commands, it's not to be punished like Nadab and Abihu's violation because it doesn't represent the same flagrant disobedience.

God has sympathy for Aaron. Moses was satisfied we're told and we are to understand from that God also. Remember, God declares later on in Hosea chapter 6, I desire mercy, not sacrifice, an acknowledgement of God rather than burnt offerings.

God can see into Aaron's heart. He knows his intentions. He knows that Aaron does acknowledge God regardless of how technically correct his burnt offerings are or are not.

Folks, it seems to me that it is an enormous blessing to us that this part of the narrative is recorded as well. That Moses doesn't choose to only record in writing the warning that comes with the punishment of Nadab and Abihu, but he also engrosses in Holy Scripture this evidence of God's grace.

[22 : 02] Our understanding of God's character is informed by both parts of this chapter. He is a consuming fire and he is a God of grace.

With this end of this chapter, we're not left wondering, are we? We're not left wondering, does this incident with Nadab and Abihu, does that mean that God's out to get me?

Does it mean he's watching for the slightest technicality because he wants to punish me? Many of you will have had the misfortune to observe or even be subject to managers who take a dislike to someone.

And from the moment that they do that, they're watching, watching for the slightest infraction. You're two minutes late, that's a black mark against your name. The manager's building their case for the fire ink.

Well, the second half of this chapter shows us that's not what God is like. He isn't trying to catch you out. He isn't watching for an excuse to condemn you.

[23 : 08] It's true that according to God's perfect holiness, all of us fall short. He is a consuming fire. But it's also true that as Peter writes, he is patient, not wanting anyone to perish.

God's grace is displayed for us in these closing verses. And so Aaron's sin, and it is sin, in failing to observe the proper processes, that sin is covered by the blood of Jesus because in his heart he worshipped God.

He trusted to God's mercy and grace. He wanted to do what is right. His desire was to honor his creator. And the high-handed sin of the person who's not interested in doing things God's way, the person who can't imagine any reason why he might be expected to repent.

That high-handed sin will be treated very differently than the sin of those who desire to honor God, who may yet fail to follow his precepts, but who perpetually return in penitence, resolved to walk henceforth in his ways.

My friends, let us be in that latter category and not the former because our God is a consuming fire and our God is full of boundless grace.

[24 : 26] Let's pray. Lord God, we thank you for feeding us with your word this evening. Though it is uncomfortable, though it does trouble our hearts, thank you that you offer us also your comfort, that you minister to us your grace. We thank you that we know you in your holiness, alongside your mercy and your grace. Amen.