

Treating God as Holy

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[0 : 00] at home we've been re-watching Downton Abbey. And as with the case in other stories, in Downton Abbey there's a pattern of triumph and tragedy. When all seems to go well with all the characters, we can almost tell that there's going to be a tragedy soon.

Either that person dies or this person is betrayed or that person suffers violence. Such is the drama of human imperfect life.

It goes back to Adam and Eve, beginning of the Bible, two chapters of greatness and then it goes downhill from chapter 3.

And we see the same thing here. Last week in chapter 8 and 9, we saw the triumph of Israel priesthood. Everything goes smoothly during the ordination.

The priests do everything correctly. Israel gets to see God's glory and gets to dwell with Him. And it ends with people shouting in joy.

[1 : 19] But just like any other story that involves sinful humans, there's always a tragedy waiting. And so here in chapter 10, in verse 1, Aaron's eldest sons, Nadab and Abihu, do a series of things that sound like a proper priestly procedure.

They took the censers, put fire in them and added incense, all of which are priestly tasks. But then things escalate quickly.

Tragedy happens. In verse 2, at the end of verse 1, 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.

Such a tragedy. And this tragedy is highlighted by the contrast between the start of chapter 10 and the end of chapter 9.

In chapter 9, fire comes out from the presence of God and consumes the sacrifices with acceptance.

[2 : 36] Here, fire comes out and consumes the priests. Almost the same words. In chapter 9, the fire is proof of God's glorious blessing.

Here, the fire is proof of God's glorious judgment. In chapter 9, fire is followed by the people's joyful shout.

Here, the fire is followed by Aaron's mournful silence. It's a tragedy because all of these events happen on the same day.

Very quickly after the celebration of God's dwelling with Israel, the Israelites are reminded that living with God is costly.

It is costly because He is a holy God, and they are unholy humans. And at this point, we are forced to ask, hang on, what actually happened here?

[3 : 44] What was it that Aaron's sons did that was so bad? Well, as the text says in verse 1, they offered unauthorized fire.

But what does that mean? Well, there are two main interpretations of the mistake that they made. One interpretation says that the fire that they offered was not commanded by God.

That is, they offered it out of their own decision. They trust their own judgment. Another interpretation says that their mistake is unauthorized entry.

That is, they entered the tabernacle out of their own decision without being invited by God. And this is supported by Leviticus 16, where it says, the Lord spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron who died when they approached the Lord.

The Lord said to Moses, tell your brother Aaron that he is not to come whenever he chooses into the most holy place behind the curtain in front of the atonement cover on the ark, or else he will die.

[4 : 52] So perhaps that's what Nadab and Abihu did. Nonetheless, in both of these interpretations, the root of the mistake is the same.

They take God's holiness for granted, so they do something not commanded. Throughout chapters 8 and 9, the text indicates their carefulness to do everything God's commanded.

But now, after the ordination, they think they are now priests, that they have the right to be in the inner sanctum, and they take God's holiness for granted and not tread carefully.

And God destroyed them. And then in verse 3, Moses gives an explanation. 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. The original word of honored means glorified. In the sight of all the people, I will be glorified.

[6 : 10] God destroyed Nadab and Abihu because he will not let these priests draw near while taking his holiness for granted. Priests have to approach with reverence to God's holiness so that in turn, God will be glorified in the sight of the people.

Now, there are two interrelating things here. God's holiness and God's glory. To truly understand what's going on and to understand the rest of the passage, we need to stop here and ask, what is God's holiness and what is God's glory?

Well, like Andrew said, to be holy simply means to be different. To be holy is to be set apart from the rest of the world. This is why only God is inherently holy because only God is inherently separated from all of creation.

And so, theoretically, we know what holiness is because we know what sets God apart. He is perfectly moral.

We are not. So, He is different to us. He is perfectly good. He is perfectly pure. We are not. All those perfections are, all those perfect attributes set Him apart from creation.

[7 : 39] All those attributes are parts of His holiness. But still, the holiness of God is a mystery, isn't it? Because we don't know what it looks like to be perfectly moral, to be perfectly pure, perfectly good.

What does it look like? This is where the idea of glory comes into play. Theologian Otto Kaiser says it like this, God's glory is His holiness revealed.

God's glory is the external manifestation of God's holiness. His holiness is a mystery to us, but we see His holiness through His glory.

The other day, I went to an Indonesian restaurant in Camberwell. Now, I didn't know, I wasn't sure whether the owner or the waiter was Indonesian, so when I was ready to order, I approached the waiter and said in English, can I get this one, please?

And the waiter just stood there and stared at me for a few seconds and then said, are you from Java? Java? No, no, no, no, no, you're from Surabaya.

[9 : 00] And she knew straight away that I was Javanese even though I was speaking English because of my accent. My Javanese accent is the external manifestation of my internal Javanese identity.

and just like that, God's glory is the external manifestation of His holiness, which is a mystery to us, but we can see a glimpse of it through His glory.

And so, we can begin to understand God's holiness by seeing how His glory is depicted in the Old Testament. And it's not a coincidence that God's glory is often depicted as fire.

Remember, in Exodus, when God's glory is seen by the Israelites, it looks like a cloud of fire over the tabernacle.

Fire is actually a good image that illustrates God's holiness. If we look at fire, it's separate from the things around it. It can't be touched.

[10 : 11] Everything it touches is consumed. It's pure. But at the same time, it's also beautiful, mesmerizing, powerful, full of light, and full of life.

Fire is a great image of God's holiness. Fire is to be both respected and feared and admired and enjoyed, especially on a cold day like this.

It's the same with God. God is to be respected and feared. His judgment is just. He is morally perfect.

He is pure from sin. His attributes are located in an entirely different level, separated from us. Here in this text, when Nadab and Abihu don't respect that holiness, that separation, God's holy fire

burns them.

God's holiness is to be feared, but on the other hand, His holiness is also beautiful. We can remember in Exodus, right after the Israelites worshipped the golden calf, Moses asks to see God's glory.

[11 : 36] Now show me your glory. Remember, His glory is the external manifestation of His holiness, and God agrees to make His glory pass by Moses.

But pay attention to what happens when God shows His glory. He passes by Moses and makes a self-proclamation. The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to a thousand or to a thousand generations, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion, and sin, yet He does not leave the guilty unpunished. He punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation. Wait, wait, wait. Moses asks to see God's glory, the manifestation of His holiness, His separation, and instead of showing His untouchable, separated, high position, God stoops down and says that He is a compassionate and gracious God.

God's self-proclamation asserts that He expresses holiness to His people in gracious love and faithfulness, and also sometimes in judgment.

[13 : 03] God's holiness is like fire to be feared and respected and to be admired and enjoyed. Now, these two sides of God's holiness explain the rest of the text.

After the death of Nadab and Abihu, Moses tells their cousins to carry the bodies outside of the camp in verse four to five. This should remind us of Adam and Eve, right, who were created to dwell with God and to serve Him in the garden like priests, but who received a death sentence by being kicked out of the garden.

And then Aaron and his sons are told not to mourn in verse six to seven, or else God would be angry towards the whole community.

This is, again, a reminder of what happens in Exodus, when Israel worships the golden calf, God threatens to leave the whole community of Israel.

So we can sense the nervousness of the people here, the fear. It's completely within God's rights to cast the whole of Israel out like He did to Adam and Eve.

[14 : 29] That's one side of God's holiness, but we also see the other side. Instead of abandoning them, in verse eight to ten, God assures Aaron that he's keeping the priesthood.

This is the only place in Leviticus where God speaks directly to Aaron instead of through Moses. And the only place He does that, He speaks words of assurance.

He explains that Aaron and his sons are not to take wine or other fermented drinks, which is a common practice when people were mourning. So that, in verse ten to eleven, 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.

You see what God is doing here? God is reiterating the priestly duties. He is assuring Aaron that he and his remaining sons are still God's priests.

Instead of casting them out like he did to Adam and Eve, God kept them close. And so, even though the prohibition to mourn seems like a punishment, it's actually a display of grace.

[15 : 55] It's a display of mercy that the priesthood is still maintained. God is still with God. Remember, the priests enable Israel to dwell with God.

If God keeps the priesthood, that means he still wants to dwell with Israel. God doesn't want to leave them like he did in Exodus 33 or cast them out like he did to Adam and Eve in Genesis 3. This is the beauty of God's holiness. He is a gracious and compassionate God. And so, compared to the value of God who dwells with them, the loss of Aaron's sons is not enough to make them abandon their priestly duties to mourn.

Because those duties enable the holy, beautiful God to dwell with them. I mean, it's still painful to lose sons, I would imagine.

I can't even begin to comprehend how it would feel to lose Kai. But what the text is saying here, that compared to these two sons, God's holy beauty is too valuable to abandon.

[17 : 19] We can hear an echo of this in Jesus' words to the disciples. anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me. Anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.

If we see, truly see, the beauty of God's holiness, we will nod in agreement, even though it's painful. Now, not only that the priestly role is maintained, God's provision for the priests is also reaffirmed in verse 12 to 15.

Here in these verses, Moses re-highlights that the priests are given some of the leftover grain offering, the breast of the wave offering, and the thigh.

Now, these instructions have been said before. There is a reason why these instructions are repeated in this section. After the terrible thing that just happened, God, through Moses, continues to assure Aaron and his sons that he is keeping them, and he's going to continue to provide for them by his grace and mercy, which is an expression of God's holiness.

So, this context explains Moses' anger in verse 16-18. Moses is angry towards Aaron's remaining sons, Eliezer and Athamar, because instead of eating and enjoying their share of the sacrifices, they burn it up.

[19:07] Now, in light of what we have said about God's holiness, this is serious. Nadab and Abihu, the first two sons, don't fear the judgment side of God's holiness, so they die.

Will Eliezer and Athamar die, because they don't enjoy the gracious side of God's holiness? Because both sides glorify God, right?

The people will glorify God if they both fear God's judgment and see God as the gracious, merciful God. And so Aaron replies in verse 19, 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. Again, several different interpretations have been offered.

It could mean that Aaron's sons did not eat their share of the sacrifices because they feel that it's not appropriate to eat in the place where death has happened because death brings uncleanness to the place.

[20:29] Or it could mean that they did not eat because they feared God's holiness. They feared that they might do something wrong as their brothers did. God's holiness.

In any case, they showed reverence to God's holiness, and they leave out their calling to distinguish between the holy and the common, the clean and the unclean. So, despite the seeming disobedience, this second deviation does not signal priestly failure, rather the reverse.

It is a confirmation that Aaron and his remaining sons are taking God's holiness seriously. And so, we see in this chapter an interplay between the two sides of God's holiness.

God is to be feared because of his judgment, but he is worth admiring because of his gracious mercy. So, two points of application.

First, we can see the same sides, the same two sides of God's holiness in Jesus as well, as he is truly the glory of God, the external manifestation of his holiness.

[21:57] So, during his life, he announced judgment to people who would not repent like the Pharisees, but to those who were penitent like the prostitutes and the tax collectors, he said, come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.

Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. such beauty.

And so, on the cross, we can see how God's holy judgment and his holy mercy meet. As the hymn says, when Satan tempts me to despair and tells me of the guilt within, upward I look, not inside I look, upward I look and see him there who made an end of all my sin, because the sinless Savior died, my sinful soul is counted free, for God, the just, one side of his holiness, is satisfied to look on him and pardon me, the other side of his holiness.

The just side of God's holiness and the pardoning, forgiving side meet in Jesus. Don't tell me that God's holiness is not beautiful.

And because we are now in Jesus, the presence of the holy God is in us.

[23:40] Pentecost Sunday, the Holy Spirit is with us. This is good news, isn't it? The Holy Spirit is in us, declaring us to be holy. We can approach God as his priests any time without being burnt.

Second, second point of application. Last week, we maintained that we were called to be priests. So let this passage be both a warning and a source of encouragement for us.

A warning, because if we want to approach God, we have to do it carefully. This is why in Hebrews it says, let us be thankful and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.

Let's not take God's holiness for granted. His glory is like fire. Let's tread carefully, especially because now God's holy presence is in us, in our bodies.

And so Paul expresses one specific warning regarding this. Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a person commits are outside the body, but whoever sins sexually sins against their own body.

[25 : 13] Do you not know that your bodies are temples, tabernacles of the Holy Spirit? who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own.

You were bought at a price. Therefore, honor or glorify God with your bodies. Let's not take God's Holy Spirit in us for granted.

Let's tread carefully. Keep your bodies holy. But also, let this passage be a source of encouragement, especially when we feel weary and burdened by all our unholiness, by all the requirements of self-righteousness, by all our attempts to please the world around us.

So much burden. But when we come to Jesus, He gives us rest because we meet the God who is gracious and merciful.

And God desires to dwell with us and He has mercy on us and He has welcomed us into the beauty of His holiness. Let's not forget this beauty.

[26 : 35] Now, I know we're Anglicans, but the Westminster Shorter Catechism has something nice to say about this. Question one, what is the chief end of man?

What is the purpose of human beings? Answer, man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever. Enjoyment of God is a crucial and necessary part of glorifying God because beauty is a crucial and necessary part of God's holiness.

holiness. Do you enjoy God's holiness? Or is God just scary to you? Are you a Christian only because you feel God's holy judgment in hell?

Or are you a Christian also because you desire His holy beauty that you will partake forever in the new creation in heaven? As Tim Keller said, religious people find God useful.

Christians find God beautiful. Let's pray. Father, you are holy.

[27 : 53] You are to be feared. You are to be admired. As we now share your holiness in Jesus through the Holy Spirit, help us to glorify you with our bodies for the sake of your holy name.

Amen. Amen.