

Living Near the Holy God

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[0 : 0 0] well um it had been a grand day well actually in fact that's not quite correct it had been a grand week that this particular day was topped off by another grand day and to think that it nearly did not all happen you see this particular nation israel had sinned with the golden calf in the golden calf incident they had done a sin that was overwhelmingly degenerate corrupt mooses had seen what they were doing he had interceded god had relented the lord had even allowed his nation to build a tabernacle and this last week in israel's history the tabernacle had been consecrated the priests were invested into office and this day marked the climax aaron alone officiated although his sons assisted him as high priest he offered up nearly every kind of sacrifice that the lord had instructed them to give the fellowship offerings gave the whole thing a festive feel expectation mounted as mooses promised that the lord himself would appear then sin offerings burnt offerings were offered an ox and a ram were slaughtered as a fellowship offering for the people blood was splashed on the sides of the altar aaron would wave the breasts and the right thighs before the lord as a wave offering then he lifted his hands toward the people and blessed them then he stepped down he and mooses went into the tent of meeting they came out again they blessed the people again and the glory of the lord appeared to all the gathered people fire came out of the presence of god and consumed the burnt offerings and the fat portions that were on the altar and the people saw it and they shouted for joy and then they fell down in worship it had been a great day and it was still going and then it happened aaron's eldest sons they made a disastrous mistake they nadab abihu took their censers they put fire in them they added incense they offered unauthorized fire before the lord contrary to his command and god responded fire came out of his presence and consumed them and they died before the lord and then mooses spoke to aaron and said 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 and aaron heard and he remained silent friends today we begin a series of sermons just three short sermons on a particular doctrine of the bible that doctrine is the doctrine of the atonement it is a doctrine that lies at the heart of christian faith it is a doctrine that has been under scrutiny for the last couple of decades and it's a doctrine that we need to understand and in order to understand it properly we need to start at the right place we need to start with god and this passage is going to help us with that start it will unlock the nature of god for us it will help us understand how we and unholy people can come near to a holy god such as the one we meet in leuiticus so let's get started i need to tell you we have great things to learn about god we have some sobering truths to learn about ourselves we have joyous things to learn about our god what our god has done in his son jesus christ and we have practical things to learn about how we can draw near to and live before this holy god so let's pray as we get underway

lord our father open our eyes today that we might behold wonderful things from your word soften our hearts that they might receive that word transform our wills that we might be doers of your word loose our tongues that we might proclaim it and we ask this for the glory of your son who is your living word and in whose name we pray amen friends i'd like you to open up your bibles at leviticus chapter 10 i'd love to spend uh the whole of our time the time together explaining the whole of the chapter but i don't want to keep you here till about three o'clock this afternoon or whatever no it would wouldn't be that long but it would be a long time uh let me just refresh your minds as to where we are in the book of leviticus in terms of the old testament we are in the third book of the bible in the first book god created the world created humans to live under his loving rule but we heard within the first three chapters that humans rebel and that god judges their rebellion they continue to rebel and in chapter 12 god chooses one couple from all of humanity and indicates that through this couple and through their family he will bless the world they are of course they are of course abraham and sarah and the rest of genesis tells us how that family grows and how it ends up in egypt and in the book of exodus we hear how they become a great nation and how their size becomes a threat to the egyptians themselves we also hear how god spectacularly rescues them and enters into a covenant with them and for their part they accept the covenant but then they do their own spectacular thing you see while moses is uh up on mount sinai delivering uh and god is delivering the 10 words to him the 10 commandments they are down the bottom of mount sinai creating a golden calf and bowing down to it and worshiping it and breaking the first two of those 10 words that god is giving but moses intervenes he and god agrees to dwell among his people and the sign will be the tabernacle through an elaborate system of sacrifices he the holy god will be able to live among them and an unholy people the system of sacrifices delivered in the wilderness at the foot is is delivered in the wilderness at the foot of mount sinai and it's contained in the book of leviticus chapters 1 to 7 outline the sacrificial system chapter 8 is about consecrating priests chapter 9 as i told you earlier on is the eight days of preparation and initiation and with all of that background we come to this passage we have today nadab and abihu and as i indicated earlier they are the eldest sons of aaron and in israel priesthood is connected with families and so in normal circumstances they would be set to take on his role eventually they would themselves become high priests however if you read through the books of genesis and exodus you remember it's not always the younger ones who end up in the positions of authority do you remember that abel not cain isaac not ishmael jacob not esau joseph not the other brothers and even moses and not they're on anyway they would have been expecting that they would have finally become high priests and interestingly abel and cain incident is also linked with offerings like this one but let's take a look at what they did and see if we can work out what's wrong with it so have a look there are a number of things to note first of all we're told that they take censers now censers are utensils that you use for um catching ashes from the great or carrying alive coals anyway what they do is they have these censers and they put fire in them and then they add some incense now incense is sometimes taken into the most sacred part of the tabernacle by the holy by the high priest it was then

take it was taken into the holy of holies and the mention of incense here may indicate that these two young men or these two men were usurping the high priest's privileged position if so it was an act that would have caused deep fracture within all of the priesthood right from the beginning of its ministry it would have been a disastrous thing so that's one possibility as to what's going on some people think that these are just enthusiastic young men who made it who basically did something accidental others think they were drunk because if you look down in verse 9 you'll see there are comments about alcoholic beverages others think that nadab and abihu were doing what they were doing was trying to incorporate some foreign elements into the worship that happened in the temple in the end i don't think we know what exactly it was that they thought they were doing however we do know what was wrong can you see it there in the passage look at verse 1 again carefully they took senses they added incense and they offered unauthorized fire before the lord contrary to his command did you notice two things about the fire it is clarified in two ways it is one unauthorized and two it is contrary to the lord's command whatever they were doing was unauthorized by god they were doing something contrary to the lord's command it was not prescribed by god's word they were disobeying god they were doing something illicit as far as his will was concerned they were being typically human seeking to live and act independently from god they would and they were doing it in the very place where god was seen to dwell among his people right there in the presence of god they were disobeying god's word it has all the marks of adam and eve unauthorized in the presence of god contrary to the command of god sinful now let's see what happens verse 2 the verse is clear fire came out from the presence of the lord and consumed them and they died before the lord now i should just note that whatever this means it doesn't mean their bodies were incinerated does it how do i know that because their bodies are still around a few verses later and being buried let's turn to what happens though i think if we were honest and we read verse 2 we find this verse quite confusing if not affronting don't we we may think that god is over overreacting mightn't we some of us might even think that he looks like he's doing what we don't like seeing in a god he looks capricious vengeful erratic he doesn't look like what we think a true god should look like some of us might even be saying he doesn't look like the god we meet in jesus christ in the new testament in other words he doesn't look like the god that we christians want to worship however friends let me urge us not to be too quick let's see if we can understand better what is going on and in order to do so there's no better place to go than moises who appears to have a divine word about what's going on here more than all others he's known this god for a long time as well and he knows him intimately and well so let's hear what he has to say verse 3 first he says he has a revelation from god and then he tells us what that revelation consisted of the lord spoke to him and said these words among those who approach me i will be proved holy and in the sight of the people i will be honored now in the original language the words i will be proved holy is actually one word and i will be honored is also one word and they're a matched pair and they should be read together they are both words that feature in the 10 words the 10 commandments that the word for honoring in the sight of all people is the word used of god honoring himself through what he does with pharaoh but did you notice something else did you notice that there's gradations here that the closer you get to god the more the language

of holiness is used in the sight of all the people the lord will be honored however those who approach him as priests by them the lord will be proved holy can you see what's happening the closer you get to the things that symbolize the presence of god the more you must sanctify yourself and the more caution you must exercise because the closer you get to god the more risky the business is now look at the end of verse 3 aaron does the wise and right thing before the holy god he remains silent perhaps he sensed the lord's holiness and grasped the error of his sons he accepts god's holiness and judgment and he refuses to lash out at god now anyway there's the first three verses now let's see what they mean theologically i want to urge you to understand deeply and seriously what we find here you see verse 3 and the whole of the book of leuiticus makes very clear that the god we worship is a holy and a jealous god his honor his glory his distinctiveness his character his distance from his creation in terms of these things is very important to him without it he is not god and that's captured in deuteronomy 4 24 as moises explains to the people before they enter the promised land that he won't be going with them because of his sinfulness and he urges them not to forget the covenant they have with god and he warns them with these words for the lord your god is a consuming fire a jealous god friends the lord is a holy god the nearer you get to him the more careful you have to be he consumes those who profane him and his glory and friends uh we christians know this we have even prayed that god might be like this this morning did you notice it whenever we say hallowed be your name we're saying god may your name be what it is holy among the nations friends our god is a true god his holiness is real and we've seen it here it is palpable visible demonstrable risky and real it affects those who come near to him it can consume them in the sense of absorbing them or it can consume them in the sense of burning them up both are possibilities and moises in his life has experienced both he knew no no better good no more consuming good than being the servant of this god and he dedicated his life to him but it also experienced what it was like to prove him to not prove him holy friends the book of leuiticus knows the truth about god and it's a truth we must absorb it knows that living near a holy god like this is a risky business that's why it outlines all these procedures and practices in such detail it's telling you be very careful when you come near this god now friends let us think about how all of this applies to us christians living in the 21st century i need to tell you that as i read the comment read the commentaries preparing for this week they constantly wanted to apply this passage to people in ministry i.e to me uh you know they'd say here are the leaders of god's people the priests they're being separated out for service to god i don't think that's what this passage is about at all i think this passage when you read it properly is about something much more serious not more serious but something more profound than that let me explain think about it for a moment what does leuiticus say at its heart first it affirms what the rest of scripture says all humans are sinful they are those

whose orientation is on independence from god and that orientation places them at odds with god it creates a distance between him and them because he's holy and they're not they therefore cannot be in each other's company unless something happens a holy god cannot be in the company of sinful people his eyes are too holy to look upon iniquity second that something is affirmed as atonement atonement is whereby god provides a way that our sin can be forgiven and his anger at sin dealt with that is that the distance can be bridged through such an atonement sin that has created a distance between us and god can be dealt with friends that's at the heart of leuiticus that's what it's about in many ways but our passage adds another element it says the closer you get to god the more care must be taken to be holy god indicates that among those who approach him he will be proved holy now that behind us let's move into the new testament and i want to begin by asking you a series of questions and then telling you the answers to those questions my first question is this is the holiness we meet here in leuiticus 10 only for the old testament is god's holiness here in leuiticus 10 only in the old testament and the answer no the god we see in leuiticus 10 is the very same god we meet in the new testament and if you don't believe me then perhaps you were asleep during our new testament reading do you remember some of the things said about god in the new testament reading do you remember the note about the coming judgment and do you remember the closing two verses since therefore we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken let us be thankful and so worship god acceptably with reverence and awe and do you remember the last line the crunch for our god is a consuming fire so question number one is god's holiness as we see it in leuiticus 10 only in the old testament answer no he is the same god we meet in the new that brings us to question number two second question is this so how is it that we can come into the presence of this holy god how can we come near to him and the answer in the new testament is clear we can come boldly into the presence of this holy god because of the atoning death of jesus our great high priest now i want you to pick up take your bibles up again i want you to turn to hebrews 10 and i don't have a page number but hebrews 10 19 it's easy to find hebrews you start at the back and you just go back from revelation back back back a little way and you get to hebrews and you can find chapter 10 hebrews 10 19 look and listen carefully to these verses therefore brothers and sisters since we have confidence to enter the most holy place by the blood of jesus by a new and living way open for us through the curtain that is his body and since we have a great priest over the house of god now listen to all the language did you hear it it's all language from leuiticus isn't it we enter the most holy place we enter by the blood of jesus access is granted through his body he is our great priest can you hear all of it we have been brought near through the blood of jesus god has proved to be holy and merciful in what god has done what jesus has done our sins are forgiven and we can enter with boldness into his presence and draw near to him do you hear the word boldness we can march as it were into his presence and if we are christian and we believe in jesus we are even now in the presence of god not

[20 : 18] because we're in this building but because we're in jesus we now if we are christians are in the very presence of god himself brought near through the blood of jesus shed on the cross friends this is marvelous isn't it our high priest has approached god for us he has won us access to god the god of all earth the god we see act in leuiticus we are now in the very presence of this god as the writer of hebrews 12 has said in verses 14 to 18 you haven't come to a mountain like they had back at sinai that can be touched that's burning with fire to darkness gloom and storm to a trumpet blast or such a voice speaking words that those who heard begged that no further word be spoken to them because they couldn't even bear what was commanded of any even an animal touches the mountain it must be stoned to death the sight was so terrifying that moises said i'm trembling with fear friends that's not what you've come to something even more awesome than that you have come to mount zion the city of the living god the heavenly jerusalem you have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly to the church of the firstborn that's you that's us to the church of the firstborn whose names are written in heaven you have come to god the judge of all to the spirits of the righteous made perfect to jesus the mediator of a new covenant and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of abel because the blood of abel cried out for vengeance but the blood of jesus cries out for forgiveness and you through that forgiveness have been brought near to him friends we don't have the access that aaron and his boys had no we have access into heaven itself we have come to god himself and because of his blood shed for us on the cross friends can you now see why i thought they were wrong the commentators you and i are there together because i'm a leader of god's people i'm no closer to god than you are because i come near to god on the same basis as you do the blood of jesus shed on the cross we stand there together there is no closer you can get than that we are in a most privileged position and that brings me to question three i want you to ask this question with leuiticus 5 in mind the question is this if i am now in the presence of god then what happens if i despise the death of jesus by not clinging to him not continuing to believe in him friends there is only one authorized sacrifice accepted in god's heaven only one if you desert it then your only experience will be of god as a consuming fire for among those who approach god he will be proved holy and we are approaching him and there is no one closer to god than the person who has been brought near by the blood of jesus and if such a one despises the only acceptable sacrifice then all that can be expected is the judgment of god so in this sense we are in a most privileged position but friends we are also in a most perilous position

and it's this comment that brings me to my final note turn back with me to hebrews 12 and i want you to notice verse 14 verse 14 we have seen haven't we through leuiticus that holiness is expected by those who are close to god and we know that we are close to god if we are christians and that is what verse this verse says look at it the writer says make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy without holy holiness no one will see the lord friends take this in and absorb it remember leuiticus 10 you have been brought near to god through jesus there is no room for lack of holiness where you are without holiness no one will see the lord and some of the signs of lack of holiness are actually listed here in our verses can you see it they are bad relationships verse 14 they are bitter roots verse 15 they are sexual immorality verse 16 and chapter 13 verse 4 if you just flip ahead they are godlessness verse 16 they are in chapter 13 verse 5 lack of lack of lack of lack of lack of lack of lack of lack of lack of contentment friends can you hear what i'm saying flee from immorality sin and the things that used to characterize your non-christian existence when you were not near to god for those things have no place with you in god's presence those things have no place with you in god's presence shun them flee them let us pray father god we thank you that you are the holy god who is so holy that your eyes cannot look upon iniquity thank you father as we believe in jesus you see not iniquity but his righteousness father please help us to live lives of godliness and the holiness that you have brought up bought us for please father work in us by your spirit to create us the people you have made us to be we pray this in jesus name and for his sake amen