

Treating God as Holy

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[0 : 00] Good morning. Please turn your Bibles back to Leviticus 10. I'm going to look at the whole passage, the whole chapter. Now, who likes watching TV series?

Everyone, apparently. So at home, we've been re-watching Downton Abbey. And as with the case with 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 this person suffers violence.

Such is the drama of human imperfect life. And it all goes back to Adam and Eve. In the beginning of the Bible, two chapters of greatness, and then it all goes downhill from chapter 3.

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

[1 : 26] The priests do everything correctly. Israel gets to see God's glory and dwell with him. And it ends with people shouting in joy.

But just like any other story that involves human sinfulness, there's always a tragedy waiting to happen.

And so in verse 1 of chapter 10, Aaron's eldest sons, Nadab and Abihu, do a series of things that sound like proper priestly procedure.

So they took the senses, put fire in them, and then added incense, all of which are priestly tasks.

But then things escalate quickly because tragedy happens. They offered unauthorized fire before the Lord, contrary to his command.

[2 : 31] And then fire came out from the presence of the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord. Such a tragedy on the same day as their ordination.

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 of God's presence and consumes the sacrifices with acceptance. Here, fire comes out and consumes the priests.

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, the fire is followed by the people's joyful shout. Here, the fire is followed by Aaron's mournful silence.

[3 : 38] Here, the fire is followed by the fire.

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The fire says that the fire that they offered was not commanded by God. It says there, contrary to his command. That is, they offered it out of their own decision.

They trust their own judgment. Now, 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 that is supported by Leviticus 16. The Lord spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron, who died when they approached the Lord.

[5 : 16] 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.

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. They have the right to be in the inner sanctum. And they take God's holiness for granted and not tread carefully.

And so God destroyed them. And Moses gives an explanation in verse 3. Among those who approach me, I will be proved holy. This is God saying through Moses.

[6 : 26] Among those who approach me, I will be proved holy. In the sight of all the people, I will be honored. Or in the original translation, it's glorified. 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 who watch.

Now, there are two interrelating things here. To truly understand what's going on and to truly 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, 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.

[7 : 51] He is perfectly moral. He is perfectly moral. We are not. So, he is different to us. He is perfectly good. He is perfectly pure.

He is perfect. All those attributes set him apart from creation. 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, perfectly pure, perfectly sinless, 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.

[8 : 56] God's glory is the same. The other day, I went to an Indonesian restaurant in Camberwell. Now, I wasn't sure whether 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 stared at me for a couple of seconds and then said, are you from Java?

No, no, no. You're from Surabaya. An exact city. 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, because his holiness is such a mystery.

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.

[10 : 15] 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. Everything it touches is consumed. It's pure. Fire is also beautiful, mesmerizing, powerful, full of life, and full of light.

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

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.

[11 : 31] His attributes are located in an entirely different level, separated from us. Here, 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 so beautiful. We can remember in Exodus, right after the Israelites worshipped the golden calf, Moses asks to see God's glory.

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, saying, Wait, wait, wait, wait.

Moses asks to see God's glory. 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.

[13 : 14] God's self-proclamation asserts that He expresses holiness to His people in gracious love and faithfulness, and also sometimes in judgment.

God's holiness is like fire. 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, verse 4 to 5.

Now, this should remind us of Adam and Eve, 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 in verse 6 to 7, Aaron and his sons are told not to mourn. That's what they do when they mourn.

[14 : 25] They let their hair become unkempt, and they tear their clothes. So, don't mourn, or else God will be angry towards the whole community. Again, this is a reminder of what happens in Exodus, right?

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 with Adam and Eve. That's one side of God's holiness.

But we also see the other side. Instead of abandoning them, in verse 8 to 10, God assures Aaron that He's keeping the priesthood.

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

[15 : 38] 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, verse 10 to 11, 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. God is reiterating the priestly duties here.

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, a display of mercy that the priesthood is still maintained.

Remember, the priests enable Israel to dwell with God. If God keeps the priesthood, that means He still wants to dwell with Israel.

[16 : 50] 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's dwelling with them, the loss of Aaron's sons is not enough to make them abandon their priestly duties to mourn.

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

I can't even begin to comprehend how it would feel to lose Kai. But, compared to those two sons, God's holy beauty is too valuable to abandon.

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.

[18 : 09] If we can see the beauty of God's holiness, we would nod in agreement, even when 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.

There's a reason why these instructions, which have been said before, 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 by his grace and mercy.

He is keeping his provision to them, which is an expression of God's holiness. And so this context explains Moses' anger in verse 16 to 18.

Moses is angry towards Aaron's remaining sons, Eleazar and Ithamar, because instead of eating and enjoying their share of the sacrifices, they burn it up.

[19 : 43] In light of what we have said about God's holiness, this is serious. Nadab and Abihu don't fear the judgment side of God's holiness, so they die.

Will Eleazar and Ithamar 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 fear both God's judgment, 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. What does Aaron mean? Such a mysterious expression.

[20 : 52] 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 had happened because death brings uncleanness to the place.

Or it could mean that they did not eat because they feared that they might do something wrong, just like their brothers, and they might offend 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 their seeming disobedience, this second deviation does not signal priestly failure, rather the reverse.

It's 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.

[22 : 09] 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 two sides of God's holiness in Jesus as he is truly the glory of God, the external manifestation of his holiness.

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 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, it's displayed how God's holy judgment and his holy mercy meet.

[23 : 23] As the hymn says, When Satan tempts me to despair and tells me of the guilt within, 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, that's one side of his holiness, is satisfied to look on him and pardon me.

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

And because we are now in Jesus, you know what that means? The presence of the holy God is now in us.

This is good news, isn't it? The Holy Spirit is in us, declaring us to be holy. We can approach him, we can approach God as his priests anytime without being burnt.

[24 : 31] 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 our bodies through the Holy Spirit.

Let's tread carefully. Let's keep our 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.

[25 : 58] So much burden. When we go to Christ, we find that God desires to dwell with us.

We find a God who is compassionate and gracious. He has mercy on us and He has welcomed us into the beauty of His holiness.

Let's not forget this beauty. 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 or 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.

[26 : 59] 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 and partake in that forever in the new creation? As Tim Keller said, religious people find God useful.

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