

Followers of the Way

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Leviticus 10:1-11

It'd be easy to misread this text and draw wrong conclusions about God's character and His dealings with human beings. This is an episode atheist scientist Richard Dawkins might well have had in mind when he said, "The God of the Old Testament is probably the most unpleasant character in all fiction ... a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak ... [and a] megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully." That assessment couldn't be further from the truth, of course. In reality, God is "compassionate and gracious ... slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin." (Exodus 34:6-7). But He's also a holy God, and we do Him (and ourselves) an injustice and a disservice by failing to recognise that. Recovering a right sense of God's holiness and of being ourselves holy people (a people set apart) is vital if we're to fulfil what God's asking of us at this time. So, let's delve into this Scripture to see what God says about the need for holiness and how this relates to Jesus being the Way, the Truth and the Life. We'll consider the character and behaviour of Nadab and Abihu; the significance of fire and incense; and lessons for us today. But first we need some context.

Leviticus takes its name from the fact that much of it deals with the role and functions of the Levites, the Israelite tribe responsible for Tabernacle (and later Temple) worship. The book's central theme is holiness. It uses the word "holy" more than any other book of the Bible, emphasising that Israel is to be totally consecrated to the LORD. Israel's holiness was to be expressed in every aspect of national life, so that all she did had a ceremonial quality, and the people were to be dedicated fully to God. As God puts it, "I am the LORD who brought you up out of Egypt to be your God; therefore be holy, because I am holy." (Leviticus 11:45) – a phrase echoed by Jesus (and, typically, given an extra twist) in the Sermon on the Mount when he instructs his followers: "Be perfect, therefore, even as your heavenly Father is perfect." (Matthew 5:48). Those commands to be holy and to be perfect are very serious ones, and we need to take them to heart. In trying to work out what they involve for us today, we're helped by the fact that, as often in the Old Testament, in events involving Nadab and Abihu we can see spiritual realities acted out in the physical realm.

The setting is that Aaron and his four sons have been consecrated as Israel's priests (Leviticus 8:30). Apart from Nadab and Abihu, Aaron had two other sons, Eleazar and Ithamar (Exodus 6:23) and God wanted them all to be priests. God had told Moses, "Have Aaron your brother brought to you from among the Israelites, along with his sons Nadab and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar, so they may serve me as priests." (Exodus 28:1). But while all four sons were designated for priestly service, it seems that Nadab and Abihu were chosen to serve in the Tabernacle as they were the oldest. In Leviticus 9 we see this Aaronic priesthood embark on their ministry. At first all went well. After offerings were made, "Moses and Aaron then went into the Tent of Meeting. When they came out, they blessed the people; and the glory of the LORD appeared to all the people. Fire came out from the presence of the LORD and consumed the burnt offering and the fat portions on the altar. And when all the people saw it, they shouted for joy and fell face down." (Leviticus 9:23-24). Here's where we pick up the action.

Nadab and Abihu

Up till now, Nadab and Abihu have been shadowy figures. We've heard about them, but not seen them actively doing anything. We know little about them apart from what we can conjecture from elsewhere in Scripture. They were Levites on their father's side, as their paternal grandfather was "a man of the house of Levi [who] married a Levite woman" (Exodus 2:1). Though their mother was of the tribe of Judah (see Exodus 6:23 and Numbers 1:7), they nevertheless had the lineage necessary to qualify as priests. They must've been at least twenty-five, since that was the earliest age at which men became eligible for the priesthood (Numbers 8:24-25, though this may only have marked the start of an apprenticeship, as elsewhere the age of thirty is mentioned: see for example Numbers 3:4). Given that Aaron was by this time in his eighties, they could easily have been forty or more. At all events, they were men of mature years, not boys or teenagers. In view of the conventions of the time, it would be reasonable to assume they were married, though we're specifically told they had no sons (Numbers 3:4). That, of course, doesn't rule out their having daughters. What matters from our point of view is that they had (or should have had) the age and life experience needed to perform the role of priest in a sober and proper way. Whatever went wrong in this instance, it wasn't through youthful exuberance or not being given a decent chance to prepare for the task in hand.

In terms of the men's characters, there's nothing we can know for sure. But there are hints they didn't approach their priestly duties in the right spirit. First is that Moses quotes God as having said earlier, "in the sight of all the people I will be honoured" (Leviticus 10:3), which may make us wonder if Nadab and Abihu were slapdash or less than wholehearted in how they did their job. Second, Moses chose the immediate aftermath of his nephews' death to tell 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." (Leviticus 10:9). It seems an odd thing to say at that moment unless Nadab and Abihu had been doing precisely this. So, there might've been something of an attitude problem at work, and that in turn may have reflected the way they'd been brought up. The Bible describes times when their father Aaron showed serious character flaws: he failed to exercise proper control over the people during the incident with the Golden Calf (see Exodus 32:25) and subsequently joined with his sister Miriam in opposing Moses' leadership (Numbers 12). Certainly, in this instance Aaron seemingly had nothing to offer in terms of explanation or mitigation for his sons' behaviour, since when Moses reminded him of "what the LORD spoke of ... Aaron remained silent." (Leviticus 10:3).

As I say, all this is supposition, but it adds to the set of circumstances that help explain why God responded as He did to what we might otherwise be tempted to regard as an innocent mistake, and a pretty harmless one at that. Levites had special privileges, but for that very reason, were also held to a correspondingly higher standard than the other eleven tribes of Israel. As God warned, "Among those who approach me I will show myself holy." (Leviticus 10:3). Through the death and atoning sacrifice of Jesus, believers have the ability to approach God at any time. It's an immense privilege, but we need to recognise that in any circumstances other than under the covering of Christ's shed blood, we'd be taking our lives in our hands. God's "eyes are too pure to look on evil" (Habakkuk 1:13) and we are miserable sinners, "for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:23). A holy God is not to be trifled with, and to come into His presence in the wrong circumstances is to invite death, since He is "a consuming fire" (Deuteronomy 4:24, Isaiah 30:27, Hebrews 12:29) and "no-one may see [God] and live" (Exodus 33:20). Which brings us to the offering of "unauthorised fire before the LORD, contrary to his command." (Leviticus 10:1).

Fire and incense

To get to the bottom of this, we need to know what fire stands for. Here are the first five occasions on which that word is used in the Old Testament:

- Fire for the sacrifice of Isaac (Genesis 22:6-7);
- Flames of fire from within the burning bush (Exodus 3:2);
- Roasting of the Passover lamb over a fire (Exodus 12:8);
- The pillar of fire and cloud that came between Israel and the army of Pharaoh (Exodus 13:21-22 and 14:24); and
- The LORD descending on Mount Sinai in fire prior to giving the Ten Commandments (Exodus 19:18).

These usages bring together the following ideas:

- Substitutionary and atoning sacrifice (Isaac and the Passover lamb);
- The presence of a holy God (on Horeb, Moses was told, “Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground”: Exodus 3:5);
- The separation of holy and unholy (the pillar of fire and cloud “brought darkness to the one side [the Egyptians] and light to the other side [Israel], so neither went near the other all night long.” Exodus 14:20);
- The utter seriousness with which we should treat God’s laws and commandments (fire on Mount Sinai).

(Incidentally, the equivalent first mentions of fire in the New Testament all relate to judgment and hell (Matthew 3:10-12, 5:22, 6:30, 7:19, 13:40), though later the Holy Spirit comes on believers at the first Pentecost with “tongues of fire” (Acts 2:3) and the Spirit’s fire is mentioned in 1 Thessalonians 5:19.)

Incense is associated with worship and prayer. Detailed instructions for its use are given in Exodus 30:7-9 and the formula for making it is specified in Exodus 30:34-38. This special mix is for sacred purposes only, so “Whoever makes any like it to enjoy its fragrance must be cut off from his people.” (Exodus 30:38). Incense symbolises prayer rising up to heaven: “Let my prayer be accepted as sweet-smelling incense in your presence. Let the lifting up of my hands in prayer be accepted as an evening sacrifice” (Ps 141:2). Likewise in the New Testament, incense represents “the prayers of the saints” (Revelation 5:8). As with other activities involving God and His service, it should be approached with reverence and proper decorum. When king Uzziah wrongly entered the temple to burn incense, he was struck with leprosy (2 Chronicles 26:16-21).

Putting these components together, we can start to understand the seriousness of what Nadab and Abihu did. Their fire was “unauthorised” since it wasn’t holy fire taken from the altar of incense (see Exodus 30:1-6) but “common fire” taken from an ordinary, everyday source. When they put this with the incense and “offered it before the LORD” (Leviticus 10:1), they were mixing sacred and profane, holy and unholy – and doing this “contrary to [God’s] command.” (Leviticus 10:1). The importance of strict obedience to God’s commands is underlined over and over again during Moses’ leadership of Israel, as we see in the constant repetition of the phrase, “Moses did as the LORD commanded him” or a similar wording: see for example Leviticus 8:4, 8:9, 8:13, 8:17, 8:21, 8:29, 9:7, 9:10 and 10:15, with more in Exodus and elsewhere. But the brothers weren’t simply failing to obey an obscure ceremonial requirement. They were attempting to enter God’s presence without the atoning work of sacrifice done on their behalf, as represented by the fire on the altar that burnt up the sacrificial offering. Only a short while earlier, Aaron had correctly offered up a sacrifice, in response to which “the glory of the LORD appeared to all the people.” (Leviticus 9:23). In that instance, instead of fire consuming those offering the sacrifice, “Fire came out from the presence of the LORD and consumed the burnt offering and the fat portions on the altar.” (Leviticus 9:24).

This is a picture for us of the spiritual reality Jesus proclaimed when he said, “I tell you the truth, the man who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber.” (John 10:1). Jesus is *the* Way. It’s His sacrifice, and His sacrifice alone, that enables us to be treated as righteous in the eyes of a holy God, to gain eternal life and to approach the throne of the heavenly King, because as He said, “No-one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14:6). Anyone who tries to do things another way is quite literally playing with fire. When unholy things and a sinful world come before the presence of a holy God, there’s bound to be a serious reaction. Nadab and Abihu’s unauthorised fire was met by “fire [which] came out from the presence of the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD.” (Leviticus 10:2). No wonder Moses admonished his grieving brother, saying, “You must distinguish between the holy and the common, between the unclean and the clean, and you must teach the Israelites all the decrees the LORD has given them through Moses.” (Leviticus 10:11). Again, we might legitimately question whether Aaron had failed to follow through properly on the things he’d been tasked with doing.

Jesus is *the* Way and He’s also *the* Truth. What happens after Nadab and Abihu die may seem brutal, but it’s a consequence of the need for truth. Their dead bodies are carried outside the camp by the men’s cousins: Leviticus 10:4-5. They’ve become unclean and must be dealt with accordingly. That’s hard, but it’s the truth. Neither Aaron nor his surviving sons are allowed usual mourning rituals, on pain of their own death (Leviticus 10:6). That’s hard, but it’s so the priests are seen to endorse God’s actions and not to suggest they’re in any way unfair or disproportionate. The priests must stand for the Truth, even when it’s uncomfortable, costly and contrary to traditional expectations. Those in a place of power or authority often have to bear burdens others do not, which is why Moses instructed Aaron, “your relatives, all the house of Israel, may mourn for those the LORD has destroyed by fire” (Leviticus 10:7), though Aaron himself was forbidden to do so.

The Way isn’t by any means easy. Jesus said, “Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.” (Matthew 7:13-14). Truth can sometimes be hard. But following the Way and sticking to the Truth are worth it, because they lead to Life. In the light of this, what can we take from this story for the present day?

Application

Both the Old Testament call to holiness and New Testament call to perfection might seem things we can’t hope to attain in this life. We know from history and even more from personal experience that it’s impossible by human efforts alone to live up to the righteous demands of a holy God, still less to be holy or perfect ourselves. God doesn’t set us up to fail, but He does want us to recognise what we are and who He is. If we do this, then we learn to depend on him in all things. Rather than frustrate us, God wants to teach us and build us up. The Law of Moses was designed to lead the Israelites to be dependent on God. And just as God gave rituals and sacrifices for cleansing a sinful people, so He wants us to learn that only through the supernatural provision of a sinless Saviour can we hope to achieve holiness.

Lesson 1: recognise God’s holiness and increase in fear of the LORD.

To be holy means being made sacred, set apart for the service of God, morally pure, free from sin and sinful affections, of high spiritual excellence. Our setting apart as believers is of a moral and spiritual nature. We shouldn’t follow the ways of the world but the ways of God, and show a different example of how life can and should be lived. We’re to have different dynamics in our relationships and different ways of acting, so we “do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but [are] transformed

by the renewing of [our] mind.” (Romans 12:2). We’re to be a “voice calling in the wilderness” (Isaiah 40:3 and Mark 1:3) by offering the good news of Jesus Christ to family, friends, neighbours, colleagues and fellow-citizens. We’re to “prepare the way for the Lord [and] make straight paths for him.” (Isaiah 40:3 and Mark 1:3).

Lesson 2: resolve to stand for God’s Way and God’s Truth, even when it hurts.

Consecrating or sanctifying ourselves so as to be set apart for God’s service is something in which we need to work in cooperation with the LORD. As Paul wrote, “from the beginning, God chose [us] to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth.” (2 Thessalonians 2:13). This requires attention to detail just as it did for the Israelites. Every aspect of our lives has the potential to affect our destiny and the destiny of others. Every little action or inaction contributes on one side of the equation or the other.

God told Israel, “I am the LORD who brought you up out of Egypt to be your God; therefore be holy, because I am holy.” (Leviticus 11:45). He brought them out of slavery for a purpose and He’s brought us out of slavery for a purpose, too. He wishes us to be His people, which means we should be holy, since his “eyes are too pure to look on evil.” (Habakkuk 2:13). When we do things that are wrong in God’s sight, we “grieve the Holy Spirit of God” (Ephesians 4:30). We should be doing all in our power to express our love and gratitude to Him, not do things that cause him pain. Seeking holiness is one way of expressing what we feel for our Saviour.

Lesson 3: seek greater and greater degrees of holiness.

Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life. He’s calling us today to walk in this Way, stand for this Truth and join Him in this glorious Life.

Amen