

Leviticus Chapter 10

The Profane Priests

Leviticus 10:1-3 *Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, took their respective firepans, and after putting fire in them, placed incense on it and offered strange fire before the LORD, which He had not commanded them. And fire came out from the presence of the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD. Then Moses said to Aaron, “It is what the LORD spoke, saying, ‘By those who come near Me I will be treated as holy, And before all the people I will be honored.’” So Aaron, therefore, kept silent.*

On the first day of his high priestly ministry, Aaron had to experience the death of his two oldest sons Nadab and Abihu. And Aaron had to keep silent about it. He could not complain, object, question or even mourn the deaths of his sons. One also wonders how his wife (who is never mentioned) and daughters (10:14) felt about God after this news reached them.



[Picture from lawhistory2blogspot.com.]

What exactly Nadab and Abihu did is not clear. Here are some suggestions:

- Some say they used coals that came from somewhere other than the altar (16:12) – this is the most likely in my opinion.
- Some say they used some idolatrous firepan practice – possible but not provable.
- Some say they offered their offering at the wrong time (Exodus 30:7-9) – but the text says nothing about the timing of their sacrifice.
- Some suggest they attempted to go into the most Holy Place – this seems unlikely, there is no mention of any attempt to enter the Holy of Holies.
- Some say they were drunk (because of 10:8-9) – but alcohol is not strange fire in a firepan, so although the priests could not drink alcohol, it does not seem to be the sin here.

Moses' explanation is *It is what the LORD spoke, saying, ‘By those who come near Me I will be treated as holy, And before all the people I will be honored.* Moses seems to have put this statement together from several other things God said (see Leviticus 21:6 and Numbers 16:35). Or it may have been a direct revelation from God. We know of no exact statement where God said this previously. It is, however, consistent with the whole book of Leviticus. Actually, it is a good statement of the theme of Leviticus. So the holiness and honor of God is more important than the lives of people.

Leviticus 10: 4-7 The Command To Not Mourn the Deaths of Nadab and Abihu

The statement *fire came out from the presence of the LORD and consumed them* is to be equated with *and they died before the LORD* (verse 2). And the phrase *before the LORD* indicates the special localized presence of God. Other than their death, it is unclear what it means that the fire *consumed them*, since their bodies, still dressed in their priestly clothing, were taken outside the camp (verses 4 and 5). Apparently, fire came from the cloud pillar over the Tabernacle and killed them but did not burn up their bodies.

The next command from Moses to Aaron and his surviving sons denies them the right to mourn their dead. Specifically (in 10:6-7), Moses told them:

1. *Do not uncover your heads nor tear your clothes.* Then Moses gives them two reasons why they cannot not do that: (1) *so that you will not die* and (2) *that He will not become wrathful against all the congregation.*
2. *But your kinsmen, the whole house of Israel, shall bewail the burning which the LORD has brought about.*
3. *You shall not even go out from the doorway of the tent of meeting,* then he repeats, *or you will die.* The explanation for that is: *for the LORD'S anointing oil is upon you.*
So they did according to the word of Moses.

Leviticus 10: 8-11 The Prohibition Against Drinking Alcohol in the Tabernacle

Apparently, the restriction upon drinking *wine or strong drink* was only for when they *come into the tent of meeting*. Again, it carried the warning *so that you will not die*. The explanation in verses 10 and 11 is threefold:

1. *So as to make a distinction between the holy and the profane,*
2. *And [to make a distinction] between the unclean and the clean, and*
3. *So as to teach the sons of Israel all the statutes which the LORD has spoken to them through Moses."*

In each case, the purpose seems to be to keep their minds clear so that they would not make mistakes distinguishing the correct sacrifices or teaching the Word of God.

Concerning this word שֵׂכָר, (*shecar*), the Brown Driver and Briggs commentary says:

n.[m.] intoxicating drink, strong drink — usu. condemned; forbidden to priests on duty; not for princes; nor Nazirite; 'v yEtwøv drunkards; but as common drink (opp. to miraculous), allowable in sacrif. meal, commended for weak and weary.

Leviticus 10:12-15 The Portions of the Sacrifices that Were for Food

What is unusual is verse 14, which says:

The breast of the wave offering, however, and the thigh of the offering you may eat in a clean place, you and your sons and your daughters with you; for they have been given as your due and your sons' due out of the sacrifices of the peace offerings of the sons of Israel.

The eating was to be done in a clean place, apparently outside of the Tabernacle, and Aaron's daughters as well as his sons could eat it. But in the next phrase, Moses says *for they have been given as your due and your sons' due*. In this case *sons* is the same as *your sons and your daughters*. So it seems that when the eating of the sacrificial food is not confined to the sons, and the text says it is for Aaron and his sons, it quite possibly included his daughters as well. No mention is ever made of Aaron's wife. Possibly she had died.

Leviticus 10:16-20 The Error of Aaron's Two Remaining Sons

For some reason, *Moses searched carefully for the goat of the sin offering, and behold, it had been burned up! So he was angry with Aaron's surviving sons...* It was the duty of the priests to eat the sin offering after the blood had been sprinkled on the altar. Instead, Aaron's sons had burned the offering completely up, apparently outside the camp. Moses challenged Eleazar and Ithamar about it. But Aaron overheard the challenge and gave the explanation that they had followed the liturgy up to the point of eating the sacrifice. But the death of their brothers put them in a state of mind which made it inappropriate for them to eat the sacrifice *in the sight of the LORD*. Moses, and apparently God also, accepted that explanation since no punishment was given.

THOUGHTS AND APPLICATIONS

- Concerning the death of Aaron's two oldest sons, Ryrie says: *The "moral of the story" as summarized by Moses is that those who have the privilege of being nearest to God must bear special responsibility to exemplify His holiness and glory.* But the emphasis does not seem to be on privileges. I am not so sure the sons of Aaron considered their role a privilege. I can't imagine anybody wanting to spend their life burning dead animals. Ryrie is correct about it being about the holiness and glory of God, but it seems to be about the danger of being close to God simply because He is holy. The main point is, the closer you get to God, the more there is to fear. As Walt Henrichsen says: God is like a fire on a cold night—you want to get close, but the closer you get, the more there is to fear.
- It is interesting that, if Aaron mourned the death of his sons, God's wrath would extend from this priestly family to the whole congregation. But the congregation was supposed to mourn their death. Truly, God is consistent. He does not change (James 1:17). But He is also unpredictable. Very little of the specifics here could be predicted. But we can see that God is consistent. He never allows His holiness to be violated. He never allows His Word to be compromised. He always requires more of those who are close to Him. Those who are called by Him to represent Him to the people have a greater price to pay. He always demands to be in priority over anyone else, even (or especially) family members. Jesus said: *He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me* (Matthew 10:37).
- But the fact that the use of alcoholic drinks is prohibited for the priests ministering in the Tabernacle seems to indicate that they were generally consumed and at least *new wine* was not generally condemned for the congregation (Genesis 27:28; Deuteronomy 7:13; 12:17; 18:4; 33:28; Nehemiah 5:11; 10:37-39; Proverbs 3:10; Matthew 9:17). There was even a ceremony which required the priests to *pour out a drink offering of strong drink to the LORD* (Numbers 28:7). Strong alcoholic drinks seem to be recommended only for special occasions (Deuteronomy 14:26), and they were to *Give strong drink to him who is perishing, And wine to him whose life is bitter* (Proverbs 31:6). But Solomon warns: *Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler, And whoever is intoxicated by it is not wise* (Proverbs 20:1). Special service for God, such as those taking the Nazirite vow and the ministering priests, were to abstain from wine and strong drink (Numbers 6:3).
- Why were Aaron's surviving sons not killed for their breach of the sacrifice laws, yet the first sons were? Both clearly violated the commands of Moses. Once again, God does not change, He always keeps His Word, but He is not predictable. If you believe God is predictable, then you will act as if you can control God.