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## Of Wrath and Grace

### Leviticus 10:1-20

**Intro:** Ch9 records a high point in the history of Israel. The construction of the tabernacle had been successfully completed; God's instructions for offering the various sacrifices had been received; the priests were consecrated according to God's commands and the inaugural worship of Israel's covenant King in the tabernacle had ended with the King powerfully manifesting His approval by sending miraculous fire to consume the offering on the altar. It was an amazing day; a red-letter day. But the glory of God's presence would soon turn to the terror of God's judgment but through all the resulting tragedy, we must not fail to recognize the unwavering presence of God's abiding grace.

**1-5** – Nadab and Abihu were the oldest of Aaron's 4 sons. As the text describes, they bring an incense offering before the Lord in their censers (vessels in which incense and coal of fire could be carried). But, since the Lord had not commanded this offering, it is described as profane (unauthorized, strange) fire. As a result, fire comes out from the Lord and strikes them dead; the Hebrew word for devoured in v2 is the same word translated consumed in 9:24. The same fire that displayed God's glory (9:24) now reveals His judgment. Our text records a manifestation of God's judgment; an unpopular topic in religious circles today but, as we will see, it's only unpopular because it is so very misunderstood and consistently misrepresented from so many modern pulpits.

Israel's worship at the tabernacle had begun with such great promise. The ministry of Aaron and his sons had also begun with great promise. Ch8-9 explicitly state some 12 times that Moses and the priests did exactly what God had commanded. Now we see Nadab and Abihu do something that God had not commanded. That's what makes their "fire" profane – it was unauthorized! God had commanded specific types of sacrifices; Nadab and Abihu ignored God's commands and offered a different type of sacrifice. After hearing 12 times in the previous 2 chapters that the worship leaders did everything as God commanded, hearing that they now did something God had not commanded really stands out. In 8:35, Moses had warned Aaron and his sons to obey the Lord so that you may not die. Nadab and

Abihu did not heed Moses' warning. They did not obey the Lord and they died.

Well, we get the gist of their error but what exactly did they do so wrong that warranted their instant execution? The term profane fire allows for a number of possibilities as to the problem with this offering. One scholar notes that among the ancient rabbis, there were as many as 12 different suggestions, some simply being ridiculous. Among the more plausible suggestions are: 1) fire taken from a place other than the fire that's already lit on the altar of burnt offering; 2) the incense they used was not made according to the prescribed formula; 3) Nadab and Abihu appointing themselves to offer this incense in the holy place, a duty that was reserved exclusively for the high priest; 4) or even worse, attempting to carry the incense into the Most Holy Place.

Ch 16 actually provides further insight into the nature of the offense. In v 2, the Lord gives a warning to Moses to be delivered to Aaron after the death of his sons, so we can surmise that the warning is related to the offense. The Lord warns Aaron against 2 things: 1) not to come at just any time or whenever he chooses and; 2) not to enter the Most Holy Place itself. This implies that the offense of Nadab and Abihu was 2-fold: 1) they tried to approach the Lord's presence at a time He had not authorized and; 2) they tried to enter a place that the Lord had not authorized – the Holy of Holies itself. In short, this profane fire was an incense offering which they presented at an unauthorized time (of their own choosing) and at an unauthorized place (attempting to barge into the very throne room of their covenant King). This would be considered a breach of royal protocol in any royal court of that day and as such, it was a sign of gross disrespect for the Lord.

The Lord's judgment comes swiftly. In a dramatic reversal, the same fire that had consumed the offerings of 9:24 now consume those that had presented the offerings! In a single day, most likely in the very same hour, the story moves from triumph to tragedy. That's what makes this infraction so egregious. It was a remarkable day in Israel's history. Everything had been going perfectly. The priests were newly ordained, the sacrifices were successfully offered and the glory of the Lord had appeared to the people in a remarkable way. But then Nadab and Abihu manage to snatch defeat out of the jaws of victory. Still, despite the defeat (and deaths), the Lord was

glorified and His holiness was displayed. Whether it was the fire from the Lord that consumed the sacrifice or the fire from the Lord that consumed Aaron's sons, both ceremonies ended the same way: with God being glorified before the people.

To explain why Nadab and Abihu had been killed, Moses proclaimed to Aaron a message from the Lord consisting of 2 parallel lines (v3). The first half of each line explains where the Lord is to be seen as holy and be glorified. Those who come near are the priests, who approach the Lord's presence to perform various worship rites on Israel's behalf while all the people refers to the Israelites. The Lord doesn't display His holiness and glory secretly, before a chosen few, but publicly, for all to see. But, what does it mean for the Lord to be regarded (or **seen**) as holy or be glorified?

This same idea appears elsewhere in the context of a miracle that displays the Lord's power so clearly that it sets Him apart as distinct from any other being (holy), and causes those who witness it to acknowledge Him as the God worthy of all glory (**Ex 14:17-18**). A similar display occurs as a miracle of judgment in **Ezek 28:22**, with similar results. In light of these passages, we see that the Lord is issuing a very strong warning to the entire priestly family: if you do not set Me apart by your actions as the God worthy of reverence, I will use your deaths as an opportunity to remind all the people that I am indeed the God who is to be revered above all. In response, Aaron was silent – meaning, he accepted what the Lord had done. Although he was no doubt deeply grieved, he also recognized that there was no objection to make when the Lord brought justice to bear on those who failed to revere Him properly.

Again, this narrative is seen as very distasteful in many of our contemporary church societies because it flies in the face of the divine characteristics they prefer to emphasize – that of God's love, grace and forgiveness. In many parts of the Church the biblical view of divine judgment is conveniently forgotten or supposed to be something that passed away with the OT. The liberal German poet Heinrich Heine's famous last words were, "Of course God will forgive me, that's His job." While the immediate spiritual implications of this ridiculous statement may be denied by most modern religious scholars and pastors, it still has become the unspoken rule of much modern theology as it is expressed not just in their beliefs but also in their lifestyles.

To those who hold that God's swift wrath is only seen in the OT I say, "Let's not be too hasty!" We see a very similar and highly instructive occurrence of it in [Acts 5:1-11](#). There are some striking parallels between [Acts 5](#) and our text.

1) An unacceptable offering is presented. 2) The act is seen as intentional and not just careless. 3) The guilty parties are suddenly struck dead. 4) Their corpses are carried away and buried. 5) Both involve a sin and punishment that almost immediately follow a very positive scene. 6) Both texts draw attention to the glory that is given to God as a result of the judgment ([v3](#) & [Acts 5:11](#)).

These close parallels demonstrate beyond a doubt that the judgment of God has not simply been left behind in the OT. You could even argue that God's expectations of obedience and His judgments are even more severe in the NT. Still, we should recognize that these instances of judgment are not common in either Testament. This is not God's standard operating procedure. They are, in fact, quite exceptional. But, they still serve to remind the church that God will ultimately prove Himself holy, gain glory for Himself and that He reserves the right to do so no less in instances of judgment and wrath as He does in instances of forgiveness and salvation.

Ultimately, Nadab and Abihu's sin was that they failed to treat the Lord as holy, which means they treated Him as if He is like us. He is not like us. In [Ps 50](#) the Lord lists various sins of His people and in [v21](#) He says that one sin was, You thought that I was altogether like you. It is sin to think that God is like us or to treat Him as such. God's difference isn't just a matter of degree, as if we are good but He is considerably better. No, He is other, separate from us. He is God, we are human. He is the Creator, we are created. A. W. Tozer wrote, "We cannot grasp the true meaning of the divine holiness by thinking of someone or something very pure and then raising the concept to the highest degree we are capable of. God's holiness is not simply the best we know infinitely bettered. We know nothing like the divine holiness. It stands apart, unique, unapproachable, incomprehensible and unattainable."

Isaiah heard seraphim call to one another, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory!" In English we have several ways to emphasize something – exclamation point, italics, bold type. In Hebrew,

the primary way to emphasize was repetition and to repeat something 3 times was to raise it to the superlative degree (greatest level). God is not merely holy; He is holy, holy, holy. No other attribute of God is referred to in this way in Scripture. The Bible doesn't say that God is love, love, love or mercy, mercy, mercy. In fact, we should understand all of God's other attributes in light of His holiness. His power is holy power. His words are referred to as His holy promise (**Ps 105:42**). Paul referred to the OT law as God's holy law (**Rom 7:12**). His name is His holy name (**Ps 105:3; 106:47**).

Nadab and Abihu failed to treat God as holy and God judged them by striking them dead. It was a strict judgment for a strategic moment. It was the first day of worship in the newly erected tabernacle. God had given specific directions as to how He wanted His priests to conduct worship. If God allowed priests to lead worship in any way they wanted, that would have established a pattern of disobedience for years to come; maybe even for generations. This was the very beginning of tabernacle worship and they were not treating God as holy. If God hadn't responded with swift and severe discipline, corruption of worship would have continued and an accurate concept of God's holiness could have been lost for posterity. God acted decisively to remind His people that He is holy and they were to worship Him as holy. God is still holy, so God's people are still to worship Him as holy.

After explaining to Aaron why his sons had died, Moses turned his attention to an urgent issue: removing the dead (and ritually polluting) corpses from the front of the sanctuary, meaning, in front of the Most Holy Place, where the ark of the covenant was kept. Moses called the cousins of the deceased to carry the bodies outside the camp.

**6-7** – After the death of a loved one, it was normal for ancient Israelites to enter into a period of formal mourning in which they became ritually impure (through close contact with the ritually defiling corpse). So, while this command may seem strange even to us, we must remember that Aaron and his remaining sons had the Lord's anointing oil placed on them; they had been set apart into a special status of holiness. As such, they were now forbidden from engaging in the ritually defiling mourning process; specifically: letting their hair become unkempt, tearing their clothes or leaving the tabernacle precincts to go and mourn. If they did, they would face the Lord's judgment and die. And why not? To desecrate what the Lord

has set apart into His holy realm is to show great disregard for the Lord Himself. If Aaron and his sons desecrated their holy status, they would be doing the same thing that Nadab and Abihu had done (disrespecting the Lord Himself) and thus, face the same judgment (death itself).

Yet, Aaron and his sons could endanger more than themselves. To desecrate the Lord's holy property was such a serious sin that the Lord could become angry with the entire community of Israel, much as He did when Achan stole from His holy property in [Josh 7:1](#). This wasn't the capricious response of a short-tempered deity. Rather, it was meant to emphasize to Israel the Lord's holy hatred of sin and also alert them to the presence of evil in their midst so that they could address it properly and maintain life-giving fellowship with their covenant King. This verse stands as a strong reminder to the priests of the great responsibility they bear as the people's leaders. When a captain makes a mistake, the entire ship is endangered.

**8-11** – Here, for the only time in Leviticus, the Lord speaks directly to Aaron alone, most likely to emphasize that the priests must pay attention to this particular command. The Lord begins with a warning: Aaron and his sons are forbidden from drinking wine or any fermented drink before going on duty in the tabernacle. 3 reasons are given: 1) so they wouldn't die ([9](#)). These drinks were enough to make people drunk and drunken priests were more likely to err in the specifics of their duties. Since these duties included important matters such as having frequent contact with the Lord's holy property and rendering legal decisions, drunken priests could quickly and easily commit acts of desecration or great miscarriages of justice. In fact, since this command follows so closely after the sin of [v1](#) it could imply that Nadab and Abihu were drunk. This may be a clue as to how they could make such an egregious mistake.

2) So they could properly distinguish between ritual categories ([10](#)). There were 3 basic ritual categories in Israel: the 'holy', the 'pure' and the 'impure'. It was vitally important for priests to distinguish between these so that the impure didn't defile the holy and especially so that the Israelites didn't defile the holy tabernacle with their impurities. 3) So that they could teach Israel the decrees of the Lord. The priests in Israel didn't just perform rituals; they were also responsible for teaching the people the Lord's law. They couldn't do this rightly if they were drunk and the Lord's people would suffer as a

result.

**12-20** – Moses now turns to Aaron and his remaining sons and gives them instructions on how to handle the remaining portions of the grain and fellowship offerings (**12-15**). Most of these instructions had been given earlier so Moses may be repeating them for emphasis: in light of what just happened, make sure you perform all ritual matters exactly as the Lord commanded. Still, Moses is concerned that something important has been missed (**16-18**). The goat that was offered as a purification offering for the people should have been eaten by the priests. Instead, Moses discovers that it had been burned, apparently under the direction of Eleazar and Ithamar. Moses was apoplectic over this since it looked as if they were repeating their brothers' mistake of disobeying the Lord's commands.

Moses' rebuke describes what they should have done: holy priests were to eat the holy sacrifice in a holy place. If this didn't happen, if proper protocol wasn't followed, then neither the offering nor the offeror would be acceptable to the Lord. This acceptance was especially important because this offering was given to the priests for the purpose of taking away the guilt of the community. In short, this sacrifice was meant to make atonement for Israel; as such, it was vitally important that it be offered properly so that atonement would actually take place.

Aaron's response was not some blithely offered, "Get off my back, man!" No, if the priests were making this offering on behalf of the people, they certainly were to eat of the sacrifice. But, if they were offering it on behalf of themselves as well, then they couldn't eat of the meat. Moses assumes it's only for the people. Aaron assumes the priests are included. The text doesn't explain the basis of Aaron's assumption. Maybe they felt that in some way they shared in their brothers' sin because they failed to guard the tabernacle as they were supposed to. If this sin occurred after they had made their own atoning sacrifice they may have felt compelled to include themselves in the people's offering too. Whatever the reason, Aaron insists that he and his sons actually follow proper sacrificial procedure and Moses eventually agrees with him. In contrast to Nadab and Abihu, Aaron and his remaining sons showed due reverence to the Lord by following His commands exactly.

As I mentioned in the introduction, the righteous wrath of God expressed in

v2 was not just an expression of His judgment, it was actually an expression of His grace! God not only had in mind the lives of those 2 men but also the lives of all people who would come after them. If God allowed Nadab and Abihu to offer sacrifices any way they wanted, God's people would think that they could do other things any way they wanted, like enter Canaan; divide the land or even live in the land any way they wanted. It's always been Satan's plan to lead God's people into apostasy. Satan wanted to thwart God's plan to send the Messiah Jesus through the Jewish people. But God wouldn't allow His salvation plan to be derailed. Instead, He derailed the disobedience of 2 priests so His purpose of salvation would continue according to His eternal plan. Ultimately, His plan was salvation for all humanity so in this story we see God's grace in His judgment.

Again, some people struggle with the reality of God's judgment. Others doubt it. If we stumble over the idea of God's past judgment in Leviticus, what will we do with the description of God's future judgment as described in the Book of Revelation? It tells us that one day not a couple of people but every person whose name is not written in the Lamb's book of life will be thrown into the lake of fire forever (20:15). God, in His grace, has provided warnings of His coming judgment in places like [Lev 10](#).

But, God also graciously offers salvation from sin and rescue from His righteous wrath. The story is told of a 19<sup>th</sup>-century wagon train winding its way west across America. The pioneers were searching for a place to homestead. Their wagons were pulled by oxen, so progress was slow. One day they were horrified to see a long line of smoke in the west, stretching for miles across the prairie in front of them. In a few minutes it was clear that the prairie fire was quickly heading toward them. They had crossed a river the day before but they couldn't make it back that far before the flames arrived. Then someone had an idea. He told the people to start burning the grass behind them. They did so and when a large area was burned over, the whole group moved back into the burned area and waited there. As the flames roared towards them from the west, the frightened children asked, "Are you sure we won't be burned?" The adults assured them, "The flames can't reach us here, because we're standing where the fire's already burned!"

The fire of God's righteous wrath doesn't have to consume you. God has already poured out His wrath on Jesus on the cross. Jesus, God the Son, took our sin on Himself and accepted the penalty for our sin. When we put

our faith in Jesus, God takes our sin and its penalty away and gives us new and eternal life. All we have to do is take our stand where the fire has already burned, where God's wrath has already been expressed, on Jesus. The fires of God's judgment burned themselves out on Jesus and all who are in Him are safe forever; they're standing where the fire has been. God's wrath may not be a popular topic today but His wrath is real. His salvation in Jesus is also real! 😊