

The Book of Leviticus

Lesson 6: The Priesthood Begins; Nadab and Abihu -- Leviticus 9:1–10:20

After seven days of preparation, the great day finally comes. Aaron and his sons step into their work as priests, the whole nation gathers at the tent, and Moses tells them what to expect: today the LORD will appear to you (Leviticus 9:4). Imagine standing in that crowd. Months of building the tabernacle, weeks of ordination, and now the moment when heaven will answer earth. The offerings are made, Aaron lifts his hands and blesses the people, and then it happens. The glory of the LORD appears, fire comes out from before the LORD, and consumes the offering on the altar. The people shout and fall on their faces. God has drawn near.

It is one of the high points of the whole Old Testament, a moment when the nearness of God is not a doctrine but a fire you can see. And it tells us something we must never lose: God genuinely wants to dwell among His people. The whole elaborate system of priests and offerings exists not to keep God at a distance but to make a way for a holy God and a sinful people to share life together. The fire that falls is a fire of acceptance and joy.

Then, in the very next breath, the mood turns. Two of Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, take their censers and offer strange fire, fire the LORD had not commanded them. And the same fire that had just blessed the offering now comes out and consumes them. In a moment of celebration, two men lie dead at the threshold of God's presence. Aaron, their father, is told why: I will be sanctified in those who come near me. And Aaron held his peace. The silence of a grieving father hangs over the whole chapter.

These are hard verses, and we will handle them gently and honestly. They are not here to frighten us into a cringing religion, but to teach us something the modern heart resists: that the God who draws near is holy, and that He has revealed how He desires to be approached. We do not get to invent our own way to God and assume He will be pleased. The good news is that He has shown us the way, fully and kindly, in His Son. Let us come close to this passage with both reverence and trust, learning to worship the living God as He has revealed, not as we might prefer.

Group Discussion: Read Leviticus 9:23–24 and 10:1–3 together. What is the difference between the fire that fell in chapter 9 and the fire that fell in chapter 10, and what does the contrast teach us about both the nearness and the holiness of God?

Personal Reflection: When it comes to worship and your walk with God, are you more inclined to ask, What has God revealed that He desires? or What do I prefer and find meaningful? How might this passage gently reshape that question for you?

Read Leviticus 9:1–10:20

Study Questions

1. In Leviticus 9, after the offerings are made, the glory of the LORD appears and fire consumes the sacrifice (9:23–24). What does this dramatic moment reveal about God's desire to dwell among His people and about the purpose of the whole priestly system?
2. The people responded to God's glory by shouting and falling on their faces (9:24). When was the last time the holiness and nearness of God moved you to genuine reverence, and what tends to dull that sense of wonder in us?
3. Leviticus 10:1–2 tells us Nadab and Abihu offered strange fire, which the LORD had not commanded them. What was the heart of their sin, and what does it teach us about approaching God on His terms rather than our own?
4. Are there places in your own worship or service where you tend to follow what you prefer or find meaningful rather than asking what God has actually revealed? How does this passage speak to that tendency without crushing you?
5. In Leviticus 10:3, the LORD says, I will be sanctified in those who come near me, and before all the people I will be glorified. What does it mean for God to be sanctified and glorified by those who draw near, and why does this matter for how we approach Him?

6. Aaron, having just lost two sons, held his peace (10:3). What does Aaron's silence model for us about grief, trust, and submission to God when we do not understand what He has allowed?
7. In Leviticus 10:8–11, the LORD forbids the priests strong drink when they go into the tent, so they can distinguish between the holy and the common and teach Israel God's statutes. Why does God connect sober-mindedness, holiness, and the teaching of His word, and what does it say about the seriousness of leading His people?
8. Where in your life do you need greater sober-mindedness and clarity so that you can discern between the holy and the common and honor God well? What dulls that discernment for you?
9. Drawing on Hebrews 4:14–5:10 and chapters 7–8, how does the Aaronic priesthood that begins here point forward to Christ our great High Priest, and how should the truth that all Christians are now a royal priesthood (1 Peter 2:5,9) shape the way we approach God in worship today?
10. Looking across this whole passage, the falling fire of blessing, the falling fire of judgment, the call to God-directed worship, and Aaron's trusting silence, name one specific way the Lord Jesus is forming you to draw near to God with both reverence and confidence.

Digging Deeper

Reflect on these passages: Hebrews 4:14–16, we have a great High Priest, so let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace; Hebrews 12:28–29, let us offer acceptable worship with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire; John 4:23–24, the Father seeks those who worship Him in spirit and truth; 1 Peter 2:5,9, you are a holy and royal priesthood offering spiritual sacrifices through Jesus Christ; Acts 2:42–47, the early church devoted to the apostles' teaching, showing worship shaped by what God revealed.

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