

## **THE TEMPTATIONS OF A PRIEST**

### **Leviticus 10**

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Leviticus 10:1–11 (NIV)

“Aaron’s sons Nadab and Abihu took their censers, put fire in them and added incense; and they offered unauthorized [or “strange”] fire before the LORD, contrary to his command. So fire came out from the presence of the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD. Moses then said to Aaron, ‘This is what the LORD spoke of when he said: “Among those who approach me I will show myself holy; in the sight of all the people I will be honored.”’ Aaron remained silent. Moses summoned Mishael and Elzaphan, sons of Aaron’s uncle Uzziel, and said to them, ‘Come here; carry your cousins outside the camp, away from the front of the sanctuary.’ So they came and carried them, still in their tunics, outside the camp, as Moses ordered. Then Moses said to Aaron and his sons Eleazar and Ithamar, ‘Do not let your hair become unkempt, and do not tear your clothes, or you will die and the LORD will be angry with the whole community. But your relatives, the all the house of Israel, may mourn for those the LORD has destroyed by fire. Do not leave the entrance to the Tent of Meeting or you will die, because the Lord’s anointing oil is on you.’ So they did as Moses said. Then the LORD said to 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. This is a lasting ordinance for the generations to come. 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.’”

The rest of the chapter goes on to talk about Eleazar and Ithamar’s not eating a sin offering which they had the right and the responsibility to eat from. Instead they burned it completely up.

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Moses at the end of the chapter rebukes Aaron for this and Aaron replies in the last two verses, ““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 had been pleased if I had eaten the sin offering today?’ When Moses heard this, he was satisfied” (Leviticus 10:19–20, NIV).

If I weren’t chained to series and you were asking me to preach a message from anywhere in the Bible that I might want to preach from I doubt that I would have selected Leviticus 10 as my starting place. But one of the good things about sequential preaching is that we are exposed to the Word of God completely in its entirety. And all the things that God wants to say to us are ultimately said to us even though they might not be matters of our own personal choosing. This is a heavy Scripture today. I realized the heaviness of it as I went through it in my study in preparation this week.

We have looked in chapters 8, 9, 10 about the priesthood. Chapter 8—the preparation of the priesthood. Chapter 9—the inauguration of the priesthood, and the theme, “We too can shout for joy.” But here in chapter 10 we see the temptations of the priesthood. That is, there are things happening here which spell out areas in our own life where we as priests of God are being tempted.

#### **I. The first area that I want to talk about that is a temptation for priests is the temptation of disobedience.**

That is certainly what the older sons of Aaron do here. They disobeyed the clear instruction of the Lord. They offered unauthorized fire. You’ve got to picture for a moment this grand scene. It’s the inauguration day of the Old Testament priesthood. The seven days of waiting are over. Aaron has now offered the sacrifices on that day, which are to begin the whole ritual of sacrifice throughout the tabernacle and the years of the temple. His sons are attired in their new uniforms

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as priests. And on day one they are struck down. In the midst of the celebration of something happening, they are struck down.

It must have hit the nation something like the assassination of Kennedy. Those of us who were alive at that time can remember where we were the moment it happened. It was such an awful tragedy. In the middle of the celebration of day one of the Old Testament priesthood, Nadab and Abihu are struck down. That morning they had got up and they had donned their tunics and that very same day they were carried out in their tunics, their tunics which were meant to be their uniform instead became their grave clothes.

This incident of being struck down by fire from the Lord raises questions as to what in the world was their sin, why such a severe penalty was given to them and what application we can make to our life.

**A.** What was the nature of their sin? We're told in the King James Version that they "offered strange fire before the LORD" (verse 1). The New International Version probably puts it more correctly. It was "unauthorized fire." What happened had to do with something in their censers. These were metal, bronze, or copper instruments in which incense was put for mixing aromatic spices together. The aromatic spices were vaporized by coals, which burnt in the censer. Evidently the Lord had given instruction about the coals, where they were to come from. They had not used proper fire in these.

Perhaps it was that they did not take the fire from the altar. Or maybe they were offering the incense at the wrong time. Or maybe even possibly they were drunk when they offered it although that's very unlikely. But there is instruction about not drinking here.

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Maybe they went into the wrong place. Maybe they barged into the Holy of Holies. Whatever they did, they did what they were not supposed to do and they were instantly struck down by fire from the Lord.

**B.** Why so severe a penalty for seemingly to us is such a minor affront? I think maybe we ought to look at the principle given in verse 3, “Among those who approach me I will show myself holy; in the sight of all the people I will be honored.” That’s God’s reason. Translated that is something like this, “The closer a person is to God, the more attention they must pay to the holiness of God.” Or, “Great privilege brings great responsibility.”

Aaron had been pardoned. We saw that last week from the incident of the golden calf. But here his sons are struck down on the first day of the priesthood. What God is saying through this is that He is tightening up. If on the first day of the priesthood the priest can willfully disregard His instructions then the whole institute He is setting up on day one is going to be off. Like a foundation stone and people are going to drift further and further away from the requirements He has laid down. Therefore the Lord interrupts with His judgment.

**C.** What lessons can we learn from this? Maybe we don’t yet understand it. Perhaps if we look at the lessons we could learn we could understand it better. The basic sin against God is the sin of disobedience. If you will look at critical moments in the Scripture where God has passed out judgment upon people, you will not find the judgment coming for what we define as heinous sin. We find judgment being given for what seemed to us very minor acts.

For example, Adam and Eve in the Garden. Eve simply takes forbidden fruit. No big deal...to us. But it is symptomatic of a deeper disobedience in her life to God. It cuts her off, with Adam, from Eden.

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When we look at Saul, Saul has been inaugurated as king of Israel. Samuel is supposed to show up to offer sacrifice. Samuel is delayed in getting there so Saul, being impatient with all the people gathered around and waiting for sacrifice, presumes to offer the sacrifice himself. Again, it seems to us no big deal. But instantly he is cut off and his kingship is over. He is operating in a way that shows a deeper level of disobedience to God.

Moses has led the people of God out of Egypt. He's been God's chosen person. Yet he taps the rock twice when God told him to only speak to it. And he cannot go into the Promised Land.

Again, the underlying thing is disobedience to the Lord. Ananias and Sapphira in the Book of Acts, chapter 5, come into the Christian community and say they are giving of the assets of a sale totally to the Lord's work when they kept back part for themselves. Before the words are hardly out of their mouth they're being carried out dead from the Christian church. Again, a root disobedience to the Lord.

When I go through those incidences and compare them to Nadab and Abihu, it seems to me there is something going on that links all of these incidents in common. All of them are what I might call initiatory moments. The Garden of Eden is an initiatory moment. It's the first time of disobedience. Saul and his kingship—what kind of king will he be? His disobedience shows the way he would go if the Lord let him stay. Moses begins to show in that instance that his age and his weariness is catching up with him and if God continues to let him be in that place of leadership he might continue to do other things that are worse. Ananias and Sapphira show that in the early Christian community, which was founded upon truth, God cannot permit the beginning of that community to begin walking in disobedience and untruthfulness. It would affect the credibility of the whole Church. In initiatory moments God is working.

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Fortunately, God doesn't work that way most of the time. I've often said if God worked in the Church today and throughout Christian history like He did with Ananias and Sapphira, every time we pick up a hymnal and sing a gospel song we'd all be laying in the rows. I think what the Lord is saying to us about sin is that sin is not measured by social consequences of what we think is a bad sin or not. Sin from God's standpoint is simply disobedience. Sins like this of Nadab and Abihu caution us in initiatory moments of our life to set up good patterns; to set up good patterns when we move into new home or apartment, that when we take a new job or when we enter marriage or when there's child born into the family that we be careful in those moments to attempt to lay pattern that the Lord can build upon. In those turning moments, those junctures of life when new things are starting, the Lord wants us through a Scripture like this to be reminded that there is a way that is right, a way of obedience. He's not threatening us through this Scripture. He doesn't ever say, "I'm going to jump out with my fire and catch you up and swallow you up if you don't do it right." But He's saying He's very concerned about precedents that we build in our life.

I think we're also learning in this incident that ultimately no sin goes unpunished. In 1 Timothy 5:24 Paul says, "The sins of some men are obvious, reaching the place of judgment ahead of them; the sins of others trail behind them" (NIV). That is to say, Nadab and Abihu are given instant judgment. Their sins have gone ahead of them. But most of the time God lets people's sins follow after them to judgment. The point is that whether God strikes now or whether He waits, unless sin is dealt with through redemption through Christ, all sin is in a form that is to be punished.

There are only two ways that sin can be handled. We are either punished for the sin or the sin is forgiven.

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There is a higher standard that is being shown in this Scripture that is required for leaders. James 3:1 says, "We who teach will be judged with greater strictness." When you look at 1 Timothy 3 you see qualifications for those who hold office in the Church. This precedent comes again right out of the Old Testament. It carries through to the New Testament. That to him who has much, much will be required. Of the person who is given much, much will be required. When I say this I'm inviting judgment on myself. As a minister of the gospel it's one of my responsibilities to hold forth the counsel of the whole Word of God. That means to talk not only about His grace but to talk about the things which displease God. If I talk about the things that displease God and then do them myself then greater judgment comes upon me because I was in a position of knowing more. This is the strange thing about getting close to God. As you come closer to God you become more responsible for who you are and what you say. It's a sobering thought.

I think one other element that comes out of this text that I would apply to my own life is that God will test all of our work with fire. Here with Nadab and Abihu their work is tested with fire immediately. And they are burned up. Or at least they are struck with fire. They're not themselves consumed by the fire. They're just struck as with lightning.

Paul though in a New Testament passage, 1 Corinthians 3, says that there is coming a day when all of our work will be tested by fire and it will be shown what we've been building with in our life, whether we've been building with things that last or whether we've been building with temporary things. God ultimately passes judgment on all of our works even though we ourselves might be saved. What we do in our life we're accountable for as priests. God holds us accountable for our priesthood even though we are with Him.

The text in the Old Testament says nothing about God sending Nadab and Abihu to hell. Nothing said about that at all. All we know is God was displeased with their work. Therefore He judged

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them. The New Testament gives us the same principle in 1 Corinthians 3. God will either be pleased or displeased with our work; although we ourselves might be saved, whatever we built will be tested with fire. The things that are temporary and didn't really matter will be burned up. I don't understand all the ramification of that. But I got to thinking about my years at seminary. I worked hard but when I look back over the whole three years what really lasted. What really counts? My mother always used to say, "It won't matter a hundred years from now anyway." So many things we do won't really matter a hundred years from now. Those years I went to school I worked hard at my grades, I was busy but out of those whole three years what was God most pleased with?

I asked that of the Lord. Of those three years, what really counted in eternity? Out of all the work of those three years what events stand out most in Your mind? The Lord reminded me of this incident. It struck me because I would not have myself picked this as something that would endure. I worked for a missionary organization that worked through direct mail to elicit money for feeding hungry persons and supporting the national church. It as a valid organization. My job was to simply code in the names of the people we were sending to, push a button, type the letter and make sure it was personally signed and these kind of things. I did hundreds of letters a day. I got in the mail a letter from an old man in Florida who was so touched with the last mailing we had put out about feeding the hungry that he said, "I don't have any money to give and I want to give so much. But there's no money in my house. But can you use these stamps." And he enclosed about four or five stamps. I didn't have any money myself hardly. I was in seminary. But I figured I've got more money than this man has. So I took a five-dollar bill, slipped it in an envelope without a return address and just sent it to him. I had a good feeling about that. That

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struck me that of all the things I did at seminary, the Lord would seemingly bring to my mind that one as the one that really counted. That was revelation hopefully of inner character.

When you look at all of your doing, and all of you are busy...here in southern California we've got to be the busiest people on earth. There's going to be a special place in heaven for us. It's going to be the Busy Corner. Amidst all we're doing, what really counts? What of our labor would the Lord be pleased to let stand and not destroy?

And how about our obedience to the Lord. The Lord knows that we're going to be tempted in respect to obedience. He wants us to stand true.

### **II. Another temptation in this passage is the temptation to discontent, verses 6–7 of chapter 10.**

The reason why I call it that temptation is that immediately after the death of the two older boys the two younger boys along with Aaron are ordered not to show any sign of mourning. They are surviving priests to stay within the Tent of Meeting and they could not in any way show grief, tearing their garments or letting down their hair or any typical things that in that culture would have shown grief. The reason why they were forbidden to show grief was that they as the surviving priests had to identify with God's viewpoint and not arouse suspicion that they condoned the sin that the older boys had committed. They were told to remain at their posts.

As I meditated upon this it dawned on me again the order of encampment of the Israelites. There is some devotional application from this. The tribes were positioned in circle around the Tent of Meeting. This was the outer circle of the encampment, the circle of the men of war. Then the inner circle round the Tent of Meeting was priestly Levite families. This was the middle circle, the circle of supporting ministry, both to the men of war and to the priests that were in the Tent

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of Meeting. The Holy Place, the inner circle consisted of Moses, Aaron, and Aaron's sons. This was the inner circle of sacrifice and worship.

In a difficult time the temptation we face is to leave the inner circle. The inner circle of prayer, worship and intercession with God. I'm sure that day Eleazar and Ithamar must have been tempted to quit, to become bitter with God for His severe judgment, and to cave in and say, "It's not fair." Whenever adverse circumstances happen to us in life those are exactly the feelings we have. "It's not fair. Why did the Lord let it happen?" And the Lord is saying to the Old Testament priesthood, "Even when you may not inwardly feel that what has happened is right, stay in the inner circle anyway. It is your salvation and it is your life to remain in the inner circle of fellowship and relationship with God."

Several illustrations of this in the Scripture: Paul and Silas at Philippi. They have had a horrible second missionary journey and they wind up beaten at Philippi. In the middle of the night they show that they have not left that inner circle of communing and prayer with God, even though their outer circumstances have been horrendous. They're worshipping and praising God. This Scripture is saying that even in your asking "Why," don't leave the inner circle.

Ask all the questions you want but stay in that inner circle with God and keep talking to God and keep in fellowship with God. Your life and the life of the people around you depend upon your remaining there. If you step outside that circle of relationship with God, you walk into a world of bitterness that not only affects you, it affects the people you are with and ultimately it has no advantage for the short term nor for the long term for eternity. The key is staying there and dealing with your grief and with your anger in the presence of the Lord.

**III. Here's one other temptation in this chapter. That is the temptation of self-indulgence.**

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The priests are told to stay away from wine or fermented drink whenever they went into the Tent of Meeting. Wine would destroy their judgment and they then couldn't distinguish between the clean and the unclean. Here again is the situation. They've been told they can't go outside the Tent of Meeting, so what do you do if you can't go outside? "We've got to deal with the grief somehow. Take an intoxicant that will help assuage the pain! Deal with it that way." But knows our hearts! He realizes that the way to deal with pain is not to become drunk, not to take something chemical that will drown the pain, but to stay there and receive the grace of God to face up to whatever the adversity is.

Our society unfortunately is a society in which we advertise the chemical means to come to grips with emotional pain that we feel. The Lord is telling us as His priests that He wants us to work through somehow the emotional processes, to come to grips with the adversities of life without having to resort to things which impair our judgment and will also destroy us as individuals.

The sequel to this story is that Eleazar and Ithamar are so wrought up with grief even though they can't show it that they mess up and sacrifice a sacrifice the wrong way. They have it all burned up instead of eating it. Moses thinks maybe God will wipe out the whole priesthood for this. He's very angry with Aaron. Aaron comes back and says basically "We didn't mean to do it. I couldn't have eaten the meat today anyway. Won't God understand?" And Moses is satisfied with that response. Which is a way of saying again in the Old Testament, God always distinguishes between intentional sins and unintentional sins. Nadab and Abihu had been intentional. And Eleazar and Ithamar had been unintentional. So the chapter closes with a word of grace.

**IV. When I look at all of these things then try to apply them to you and me I have questions, serious questions.**

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Is the Lord speaking to you today about an area of disobedience in your life? Clear, known disobedience to Him? By His grace He doesn't treat us like Nadab and Abihu. They serve simply as examples. But He wants us through these examples to take seriously His personality, and to not simply say "God forgives. That's His businesses, isn't it?" and suppose that we don't have any accountability ourselves. One of the great things lacking in contemporary preaching in trying to reach the modern audience is that we fail to dwell enough upon the holiness of God and the fear of the Lord so we may treat God lightly.

This Scripture is saying to us, don't treat God lightly. Take relationship with Him seriously. I suspect even beyond that—and I felt especially a witness in my heart about this as I prayed for this message—that there are some of you who have gone through real hurts and feelings toward God as to why He'd let things happen to you. Imponderables. I don't have the answer for those. You don't have the answer. We may not have the answer until we see the Lord face to face. But don't leave that inner circle of relationship and fellowship with Him. That's the place of safety. That is where God can still meet with you and talk with you. That is the salvation of your own life and of your family's life to stay there in that inner place. While you're staying there don't go to a cop-out of trying to find ways to drown yourself in some form of sensual experience or chemical experience that will lighten the load for you. But rather find in that inner place a restored fellowship and communication with God. Stay with God in the inner place of worship.

### **Closing Prayer**

Father, I don't know how all You intended this message to be taken by each of us today. I have a sense that even though it has not been the kind of message that I like to bring that is on the upbeat and points us to victory, it has nevertheless been a probing word of Your Spirit to some people's lives here today. I feel very definitely that there are persons in this room who have had

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a devastating experience happen to them. And to whom You are saying through this message today, “Don’t walk off. Don’t leave the place of fellowship with Me. All things will become clear as you stay there. Don’t walk out on the responsibility to Me, to your family, to the church. Remain where you are.” Lord, it takes only a moment to realize as we look at the Old Testament that indeed You did restore the priesthood and ultimately within the lifetime of Eleazar and Ithamar, You brought full healing in their life, even though they may never have understood totally what happened that day. They learned to walk with You with a new respect, a new obedience. Deliver us, Lord, from the idea that You are the God of convenience or You are the God who always does things in a way that we would do them. If You would always do them the way we would do them You couldn’t be God. Let each of us in our own life reverence You in our heart as the Lord and remain faithful. I pray, Lord Jesus, for ourselves that whatever happens we’ll stay with You in that inner place of worship, obedience, and sacrifice, understanding the sacrifices that are pleasing and acceptable to You are a broken spirit and a contrite heart and an offering up of our lives and a giving to You the fruit of our lips in praise to Your name. We ask these things Lord in Your name. Amen.