

Leviticus 10

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Nine chapters on sacrifices and ritual reached their zenith with the appearance of the Presence of God in the Tabernacle. The Lord God now resided with His people. His first action was to consume the offerings on the Altar and begin the eternal flame to be preserved by the sons of Aaron. Chapter 10 provides a narrative break between ceremony and laws, with the tragedy of Nadav and Avihu. Somehow the two sons of Aaron fail to observe the appropriate form of worship, of which they had just been instructed, and offer something called 'strange fire'.

Sometimes it's easy to think that fire is fire, as long as it burns right? But this is not the case. Moses had given instructions to discern the sacred from the profane. From this story, we see that failure to do so can bring grave consequences. What caused Nadav and Avihu to behave in this way is unclear. Some commentators suggest they offered incense from outside the Tabernacle when the only incense permitted was inside the Tent and before the curtain that separated the Holy of Holies. In verse 9 the Lord says to Aaron that he and his sons should not consume alcohol prior to performing their service before God. It's possible to assume then that Nadav and Avihu were intoxicated from the week-long preparation ceremony and in their inebriation they brought profanity into God's sacred space. The same words that describe the fire of the Lord coming forth and consuming the sacrifice on the altar are now used to describe the death of the sons of Aaron. Verse 3 mentions that Aaron remained silent; his silence is almost heartbreaking and an expression of quiet grief.

Incense is very important to the Lord. In Jewish tradition, we worship the Lord with all of our senses and that includes the sense of smell. Exodus describes the exact ingredients that God delights inside His Tabernacle. That smell is forbidden to anyone else it belongs solely to the Lord (Exod 30:34). Two of the three gifts brought to Jesus through the Magi were incense: frankincense and myrrh.

Moses then forbids Aaron and his remaining two sons to mark themselves as mourning by becoming disheveled and unkempt nor tearing their garments. Interestingly the High Priest during Jesus' trial tore his garments which, as we see here, was explicitly against the Torah. Moses also reiterates the injunction to discern between the sacred and the profane.

Discernment is one of the many and diverse gifts of the Spirit. Discerning between the paths of life and death is extremely important. Much of our world and current culture cannot distinguish truth from a lie, holy or unholy, even the differences between males and females. This path the world is on is not a path that can lead to life.

Aaron and his remaining sons, Eleazar and Itamar, take the bread or grain offering and consume it. The bread is called 'the most holy thing'. We note that at the Passover of Jesus, He references the bread and wine but says nothing of the lamb or sacrifice. Bread is the 'most holy thing' to which Jesus gives new meaning. While Aaron and his sons can manage to eat the holy bread, they are unable to feast on the sin offering. Moses berates them for this reminding them that the sin offering provides atonement for the entire community and is thus extremely important. The sin offering is also called a 'most holy thing'. Aaron finally breaks his silence to explain his grief to his brother Moses. Apparently part of Aaron's grieving process had been to fast. It seems Eleazar and Itamar followed in their father's footsteps and fasted too. Moses accepts his brothers' reply and I think recognizes Aaron's deep and personal grief.