



Strange Fire

Kicking It Off

Are you more of a checklist person or a go-by-feel person, and is there one situation where you switch?

Read

Leviticus 9:22-10:7

Summary

Most of Leviticus so far has been instructions. Chapters 8 through 10 are the first time we watch those instructions carried out, on one day, with real names attached. Moses ordains Aaron and his sons exactly the way God told him to. He puts blood on the right ear, the right thumb, and the right big toe of each priest, which marks the whole person, what he hears, what he does, and where he goes, before he ever serves. Then on the eighth day, fire comes out from before the LORD and consumes the offering on the altar, and the whole camp shouts and falls on their faces. God has accepted the offering, and He supplied the fire to do it.

That same day, two of Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, take their censers and offer fire the LORD had not commanded. The same fire comes out and consumes them. The text doesn't tell us what was going on in their heads. It only tells us that what they brought was their own. Moses repeats what God said, "Among those who are near me I will be sanctified," and Aaron, who has just lost two sons, says nothing.

It's a hard story, and it's meant to be. God is holy, and He sets the terms for how He is approached, the way a king does and not the way a voter does. That makes Him dangerous, and it also makes Him the safest one there is, because He's the one who makes a way in.

The good news is that we're not the ones flying the plane. Jesus is the High Priest who kept every part of the law, and at Pentecost the same fire came down and rested on His people without consuming them. That changes our job. We aren't trying to earn our way in. Peter calls us a royal priesthood whose work is to tell people how good God is, and to listen when the Spirit nudges us to do it.

Discussion Questions

1. Was there anything from the sermon or the passage that stuck out to you?
2. The blood on the right ear, thumb, and big toe marked the whole priest, what he heard, what he did, and where he went, before he ever served (8:23-24). Which of those three is hardest for you to hand over to God right now?
3. The sermon said we want Christianity to be a democracy, where we can vote on the commands we don't like. If you are honest, which command of God would you most like to put to a vote?
4. God is dangerous because His glory is so heavy, and He is the safest because He is the one who makes the way in. Which half of that is harder for you to believe?
5. Peter calls every believer a royal priesthood whose job is to proclaim the excellencies of the One who called them into His light (1 Peter 2:9). Who is one person this week you could tell how good God has been to you?

Significant Quotes from Sermon

"Imagine I did say, let's walk on the surface of the sun. How many checklist items do you think we would need to accomplish before that would happen? It would be thousands. You'll get crushed by the gravity. You'll be burnt to a crisp by the temperature. You'd be blinded instantly by how bright it is. And even that, in comparison to what God is telling the Israelites, is small."

"If you have a king, you don't set the terms of your relationship. The king sets the terms. And I think in our modern sensibility we want Christianity to be a democracy. We want to be able to go to God and say, I don't really like that law. Can we massage this a little bit? Can we take a vote to see how people are feeling about this?"

"God is dangerous, and yet He is the safest. Because He is so powerful, because His glory is so heavy, of course He is dangerous. But He is absolutely the safest, because He makes a way for us to enter into His presence."

"You're not flying the plane. He is. You don't have to worry about the checklist, because He did. If I'm getting on a plane and I know the person who is flying, I do hope he has his checklist, but I no longer have to worry about it, because my friend is the one flying and he already checked all the parts of the plane. That's our relationship with Jesus."

Sermon Notes**Leviticus 9:22-10:7**

Then Aaron lifted up his hands toward the people and blessed them, and he came down from offering the sin offering and the burnt offering and the peace offerings. And Moses and Aaron went into the tent of meeting, and when they came out they blessed the people, and the glory of the Lord appeared to all the people. And fire came out from before the Lord and consumed the burnt offering and the pieces of fat on the altar, and when all the people saw it, they shouted and fell on their faces.

Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it and laid incense on it and offered unauthorized fire before the Lord, which he had not commanded them. And fire came out from before the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord. Then Moses said to Aaron, "This is what the Lord has said: 'Among those who are near me I will be sanctified, and before all the people I will be glorified.'" And Aaron held his peace.

And Moses called Mishael and Elzaphan, the sons of Uzziel the uncle of Aaron, and said to them, "Come near; carry your brothers away from the front of the sanctuary and out of the camp." So they came near and carried them in their coats out of the camp, as Moses had said. And Moses said to Aaron and to Eleazar and Ithamar his sons, "Do not let the hair of your heads hang loose, and do not tear your clothes, lest you die, and wrath come upon all the congregation; but let your brothers, the whole house of Israel, bewail the burning that the Lord has kindled. And do not go outside the entrance of the tent of meeting, lest you die, for the anointing oil of the Lord is upon you." And they did according to the word of Moses.

Outline

1. God Supplied Everything Aaron Needed to Come Near, Down to the Fire - Leviticus 8-9

- a. A pilot's checklist is not the point of flying, and when the stakes are life and death nobody wants a pilot who improvises. God's glory is a greater drop than any cliff, and we have made Him a small hill.
- b. God is exact because that is His nature. Inviting an unholy people to dwell with Him is like inviting someone to walk on the surface of the sun, and even that is small by comparison.
- c. Moses puts blood on the right ear, right thumb, and right big toe of Aaron and his sons (8:23-24), so the whole man, what he hears, what he handles, and where he goes, is marked before he serves. The repetition is the good part, because none of it came from Moses.
- d. God supplies everything: the instructions, the animals whose life only He gives, and the offering itself. The people's part is to give back what He has already given.
- e. Fire comes out from before the LORD and consumes the offering, and the people shout and fall on their faces (9:24). Nobody was impressed by blood on an earlobe. They were undone by God revealing Himself.

2. The Fire That Accepted the Offering Consumed the Priests Who Brought Their Own - Leviticus 10:1-7, with Acts 5:1-11

- a. Nadab and Abihu offer fire "which he had not commanded them," and the same fire consumes them (10:1-2). Whatever their reason, they found logic in themselves to add to what God had ordained.
- b. We do the same when we alter worship to fit our culture, our logic, and our personality, and make church what we like.
- c. "Among those who are near me I will be sanctified" (10:3), and Aaron held his peace.
- d. God is dangerous and He is the safest, because His glory is heavy and He is the one who makes the way in. The fear of the Lord is respect that turns into obedience.
- e. If you have a king, you don't set the terms. We want Christianity to be a democracy, with a vote on forgiving enemies, on lust and anger, and on our sexuality.
- f. Ananias and Sapphira are the parallel when the church is new (Acts 5:3-4). Not everyone who trivializes God's word dies. At the beginning, God makes a statement.

3. The Fire Rests on God's People Now Because Christ Is the Offering It Accepted - Acts 2:1-4; 1 Peter 2:9

- a. The fire that consumed the offering in Leviticus 9 rests on God's people at Pentecost (Acts 2:3), and they become a living sacrifice.
- b. Read without the New Testament, Leviticus turns into a comparison of who keeps the most and stands closest.
- c. You're not flying the plane. He is. Jesus is the High Priest who fulfilled every minutia of the law, and I cling to Him for dear life.
- d. We are a royal priesthood, not the chief priest, called to proclaim the excellencies of Him who called us into His marvelous light (1 Peter 2:9). Pointing at our own programs is our strange fire.
- e. Obeying the Spirit shapes how we prepare for Sunday, whether we come, and who we speak to after service.

Notes

I have a friend who flies airplanes on his computer. He's methodical and accurate, and when he plays flight sim he runs every checklist a real pilot would run. I am not that person. I improvise, I go by feel, and my checklist for a run is whether I have shoes on. But if I ever have to get on an airplane, I hope my pilot has gone through every item. A pilot walks around the plane to make sure all the pieces are there. He checks the fuel before takeoff, when it can still be fixed. Part of the reason for an hour of checks is that it slows him down, because flying is stressful and the stakes are high. Climbing works the same way. Tying a figure eight is muscle memory for me by now, and the checks still matter, the knot, the rope, the belay device, because missing one leads to injury or death. Anyone who paraglides off Poo Poo Point wants to know the person who packed the kite took every step. When the drop is real, we want the checklist.

Leviticus is pointing at something like that drop. The Lord has a heavy glory, and His presence cannot coexist with sin. We are going through this book not to take away anyone's freedom in Christ, and not to lead anyone into legalism, but to remind us that as free as we are, God's holiness has not changed. His presence is dangerous. I say that so the way we approach Him respects the size of who He is, not so that you'll tremble.

When we first moved here we took our kids to the top of Rattlesnake Ledge, where the ground just drops away. Bennett was three or four, with a big head and a wobble, and the whole time I kept telling Grace that if he fell he would keep rolling. I didn't want him afraid. I wanted him to understand how high we were. Many of us have made God a small hill. Some of us, me included, are more afraid of a cliff edge than of the presence of God. My hands sweat on a ledge because I understand what happens if I fall. The weight of God's glory is far heavier than that drop.

Legalism is a bad thing, and I'll keep saying so. But the checklist was never the point of flying. The point is getting in the air and arriving. The checklist reminds you of every step it takes to get there. The Pharisees understood the checklist better than we do, and they made it the whole point and forgot to fly, so when God stood in front of them in Jesus, they did not recognize the One the laws were given to bring them near to. Our temptation runs the other way. We live in the age of the Spirit, with God dwelling in us, and many of us love His grace and have lost sight of His holiness. We carry the Holy Spirit around like a lucky charm, a guardian angel in the pocket. He does protect and guide you, and that picture still shrinks an infinite God. The right response to Him is to admit I don't even know where the beginning is.

Leviticus is so detailed that it repeats itself, and that is because God is exact. He is not a God of improvisation, and His way is not a degree off. It is remarkable that the God of all creation would speak to a group of people at all and tell them how to be in His

presence. Imagine I invited you to walk on the surface of the sun. The gravity would crush you, the heat would burn you, the light would blind you, and getting there would take thousands of checks. For God that star is a small thing He made, and what He is inviting Israel into is far greater, an unholy people living with a holy and infinite God. It isn't possible, and God is making it possible.

So Leviticus 8 is Moses following orders. He kills the ram of ordination and puts its blood on the lobe of Aaron's right ear, the thumb of his right hand, and the big toe of his right foot, and then he does it again for Aaron's sons (8:23-24). From what the priest hears, to what he handles, to where he goes, the whole man is marked before he leads anyone into God's presence. It reads as tedious, and we want to skip ahead to the good part. This is the good part. Moses is not designing a ceremony. None of it came from him. It came from the Lord, with exact instructions.

Then comes the result. "Fire came out from before the LORD and consumed the burnt offering and the pieces of fat on the altar, and when all the people saw it, they shouted and fell on their faces" (9:24). The people were not offering a golf clap for a well-run service. With the tabernacle at the center of the camp, every one of them saw the fire come from God, and they fell down because they had seen His handiwork and not the machinations of men. Blood on an earlobe had impressed no one. The fire did, and that is when they understood how seriously to take the commandments.

And God supplied all of it. He gave the instructions. He gave life to the cattle, the goats, the sheep, and the doves, because blood and life come only from Him. He gave the fire. Leviticus can feel like a book about how much the people had to do, and there is real responsibility in it, but thankfully they did not have to create life. Their job was to offer back what God had already given, with the humility of Moses, who simply did what he was told.

I wish the story ended there, with obedient priests who lived happily ever after. It doesn't, because we have the same problem Israel had. We make it about us. "Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it and laid incense on it and offered unauthorized fire before the LORD, which he had not commanded them. And fire came out from before the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD" (10:1-2). We don't have the full record of why they did it. Whatever the reason, they found logic in themselves to add something to what God had already ordained. We do the same when we adjust worship to fit our culture, our logic, and our personality, and make church into what we like.

Moses tells Aaron what the Lord has said: "Among those who are near me I will be sanctified, and before all the people I will be glorified." And Aaron held his peace. A father who has just lost two sons says nothing, because the point of all of it is God's

holiness and God's glory. God is dangerous, and He is the safest. His power and the weight of His glory make Him dangerous, and He is the safest because He is the one who makes the way into His presence. That is the fear of the Lord. It is respect for His word, and it is the beginning of wisdom because wisdom actually does what His word says. Moses kept asking whether this was where God wanted him and what God wanted him to say. Nadab and Abihu were more interested in the people and in jazzing up the service.

If you have a king, you don't set the terms of the relationship. The king does. That is hard for people raised in a democracy, and I'm grateful for democracy. But we want Christianity to be one. We want to tell God we don't like how strict He is on certain sins, that praying for our enemies is a lot to ask, that we'd like to keep a little rage, and could we take a vote on lust, and could we circle back later on sexuality once we've figured out what's best for Him. Leviticus says no. God sets the terms, because His holiness is beyond anything on this earth. The surface of the sun is still something I can picture. His presence is not.

Luke tells the same kind of story when the church is new. At Pentecost the fire of God that consumed the burnt offering in Leviticus 9 comes again, and this time it rests on the people, and they become a living sacrifice. Soon after, Ananias and Sapphira trivialize God's word and die, and Peter tells them they have not lied to man but to God (Acts 5:4). That does not mean everyone who trivializes God's word will be struck dead, or that God is capricious when He doesn't. At the start of something new, He makes a statement about who He is.

Read Leviticus with no New Testament and it becomes a comparison game. I keep six hundred of the 613, my neighbor keeps four hundred, so I'm closer. But everyone who has received Christ as Savior and High Priest is covered, because you're not flying the plane. He is. You don't have to worry about the checklist, because He did it. When my friend is flying, I don't have to check the manifest myself. Jesus fulfilled every minutia of the law, because He is the Word who was there at creation, and He stands in our defense. Some people will say they can fly the plane themselves. What I know is that I can't keep those rules, and I will cling to Christ for dear life.

So what is our part? "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9). We are not the chief priest. Jesus is, and He needs no animal's blood, because His own blood is righteous and it is given to us. Our part is to proclaim how good He is. Ananias and Sapphira made it about what they could give. The church makes the same mistake when it points at its own programs, or even at being a church that preaches Leviticus, and says, look at our

incense, everybody loves the smell. That is our strange fire. At Trunk or Treat the candy, the hot dogs, and the games aren't perfect, and kids running through the sanctuary aren't good for the carpet. What matters is that from the youngest to the oldest we are saying together that Christ is the best and He loves you. Parents, the job is not only that your kids know the Bible. They need to hear how good God is and how much He loves them, and they can tell you the same thing back.

That means obeying the Spirit. You are saved by your High Priest and not by the checklist, and He calls you a priest. The Spirit speaks through Scripture, through your church body, and through the people who lead you. It affects how you prepare for Sunday, whether you come when it's raining and inconvenient, and whether you speak to the neighbor He puts on your heart after service. Your salvation doesn't rest on any of it. You are invited into this priesthood, and together we will enter into the presence of God.

Blog

For seven chapters Leviticus has described its offerings in the abstract. If anyone brings a bull, if anyone brings flour, if anyone sins without knowing it, here is what happens. Chapter 8 is the first time we watch any of it done, by named men on a particular day, and chapters 8 through 10 are the only sustained story in the first half of the book. The system has been explained, and now it goes live.

Chapter 8 is the ordination of Aaron and his sons. Moses washes them, dresses them, anoints them, and offers three animals on their behalf, and the chapter keeps closing its steps with the same phrase, "as the LORD commanded Moses." Nothing is improvised. The Hebrew idiom for ordaining a priest is to fill his hand, and the narrative acts it out when Moses places the fat, the bread, and the thigh in Aaron's hands and waves them before the LORD (8:27). The priest stands at his own ordination holding what he did not provide.

Then there is the blood. The first animal's blood goes on the horns of the altar and is poured out at its base. The second animal's blood is thrown against the altar's sides. Then comes the ram of ordination, and Moses puts its blood on the lobe of Aaron's right ear, the thumb of his right hand, and the big toe of his right foot, and does the same to each of his sons (8:23). For most of a chapter the blood has gone on furniture, and now it goes on a man. The text never explains the three places, and we should not invent more than it says, but the plain sense is hard to miss. What he hears, what he does, and where he walks, the whole man is marked before he serves.

Chapter 9 is the eighth day, and Aaron's first act as priest is to kill a calf as a sin offering for himself (9:8). He cannot make atonement for anyone else until atonement has been made for him. The people's offerings follow in a new order. Chapters 1 through 5 taught the sin offering after the burnt, grain, and peace offerings, and now it comes first, so the day moves from cleansing to consecration to a shared meal. Then Moses and Aaron go into the tent of meeting together, which matters more than it looks, because Exodus ended with Moses standing outside that tent, unable to enter (Exodus 40:35). When they come out and bless the people, the glory of the LORD appears to everyone, "and fire came out from before the LORD and consumed the burnt offering and the pieces of fat on the altar, and when all the people saw it, they shouted and fell on their faces" (9:24).

Chapter 10 opens on the same day. "Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it and laid incense on it and offered unauthorized fire before the LORD, which he had not commanded them. And fire came out from before the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD." Read that beside 9:24. The fire comes from the same place, and the sentence opens with the same words. A few

verses earlier it consumed the offering while the people shouted, and now it consumes the priests.

People have guessed at the offense for centuries. Perhaps the coals came from somewhere other than the altar, which is where Aaron is later told to get them (Numbers 16:46). Perhaps the brothers had been drinking, since the next command God gives forbids wine in the tent (10:9). The text confirms none of it. It gives one clause: fire "which he had not commanded them." The word translated unauthorized is zara, which means strange or foreign, something that belongs to someone else, and older translations kept it as "strange fire." God had commanded both fire and incense. What made this fire strange is that it was theirs, brought on their own initiative on the very day God had shown that He supplies the fire.

Think of a king and his subjects. In a king's house the king sets the terms of approach, and the consequence of ignoring them is his to set, not ours to find proportionate. Nadab and Abihu were not strangers who wandered in. A week earlier they had been washed, clothed, anointed, and marked with blood. Less than a year earlier they had climbed Sinai with Moses and the elders, seen the God of Israel, and eaten and drunk in His presence, and "he did not lay his hand" on them (Exodus 24:11). Hardly anyone in Israel had been nearer to God than these two men, and that is the point Moses makes: "This is what the LORD has said: 'Among those who are near me I will be sanctified, and before all the people I will be glorified'" (10:3). Leviticus was never a manual for managing God's absence; it teaches a people how to survive His presence, and the ones closest carry the most weight. Then comes one of the most restrained sentences in Scripture: "And Aaron held his peace." He has just watched his two oldest sons die, and the narrator reports his silence without interpreting it. We should leave it where the text leaves it.

It is fair to hear all of this and conclude that God is dangerous. He is, in the way anything with that much power is dangerous, and He is also perfect in how He uses that power, which makes Him the safest being there is. The chapter shows it before it ends. Moses finds that Aaron's surviving sons burned an offering they were supposed to eat, and he is angry. Aaron's answer is grief and a question: "such things as these have happened to me! If I had eaten the sin offering today, would the LORD have approved?" (10:19). And Moses approves. The chapter that began with two priests dying for bringing what God had not asked for ends with a priest departing from the procedure and being accepted. What separated Aaron from his sons was the question. He was afraid of acting without God's approval, and they had acted as though they already had it.

Luke tells a story like this one near the beginning of Acts. The church is new, Barnabas has just laid the price of a field at the apostles' feet, and a man named

Ananias and his wife Sapphira do the same with their land, except that they keep part of the price and present the rest as the whole. Peter tells him, "You have not lied to man but to God" (Acts 5:4), and he falls dead. His wife follows three hours later, young men carry them both out, and "great fear came upon the whole church" (5:11). The sins differ. Ananias lied, and Leviticus never says Nadab and Abihu did. But both couples brought something of their own making into the presence of God, fire in one case and a story in the other, just after He had come to live among His people.

If Acts stopped there, we would have every reason to keep our distance. Three chapters earlier, though, the fire came again. When God opened His house in the wilderness, fire fell on the altar, and when Solomon dedicated the temple, fire came down from heaven and consumed the offerings (2 Chronicles 7:1). At Pentecost it came a third time, and it did not land on an altar. "Divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them" (Acts 2:3), ordinary people in a house in Jerusalem, and nobody died. Peter explains that Jesus, "being therefore exalted at the right hand of God," has "poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing" (2:33), and Hebrews adds that He sat down at that right hand after He "had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins" (Hebrews 10:12). The fire did not become safe. The offering changed.

So the question of Leviticus 10 still belongs to us, and not only to the people who lead. Peter calls the whole church "a royal priesthood" (1 Peter 2:9), which means the privilege that once belonged to one family now belongs to every believer, and so does the weight. Hebrews says "we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus," and invites us to draw near "with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water" (Hebrews 10:19, 22), the washing and the sprinkling of Leviticus 8 spoken now over everyone. Confidence and presumption can look alike, since both walk right in. The difference is whose offering they come under. Nadab and Abihu came with fire they made, and we come under the offering God made.

That is what Sunday is. We do not gather because we feel like it, and we do not come to hand God something we made in the hope that He likes it. We come loyal to a God who has given us everything, under the offering Christ has already made. Read Leviticus 8 through 10 this week, and before anything else, read 9:24 and 10:2 side by side. Then read the opening verses of Acts 2. Come Sunday ready to meet a God who is holy fire, and who has made a way for us to stand in it.