

# God's Holiness in Worship

## Leviticus 10:1–11

Series: Thoughts on Worship

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### Psalm 99 — **Call to Worship**

Open your Bibles to Leviticus chapter 10. This morning I want to look in the book of Leviticus and consider one of the accounts recorded by Moses as it relates to worship. This is the account of two of Aaron's sons as they came into the tabernacle and offered strange fire before the LORD. It takes place soon after Aaron and his sons are consecrated at the beginning of the priestly ministry of the Old Testament.

For those of you who are taking notes, we will consider first the event, in 5 brief points:

- 1) The Offense (10:1)
- 2) God's Judgment (10:2)
- 3) God's Purpose (10:3)
- 4) The Aftermath (10:4–5)
- 5) Warnings and Admonitions (10:6–7)

Then I will conclude with 3 not-so brief applications.

But let's begin by reading the text together: Leviticus 10:1–11 (ESV)

Leviticus 10:1–3      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.

Leviticus 10:4–7      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.

Leviticus 10:8–11      And the LORD spoke to Aaron, saying, “Drink no wine or strong drink, you or your sons with you, when you go into the tent of meeting, lest you die. It shall be a statute forever throughout your generations. You are to distinguish between the holy and the common, and between the unclean and the clean, and you are to teach the people of Israel all the statutes that the LORD has spoken to them by Moses.” (ESV)

First consider the offense. What did Nadab and Abihu do?

### 1)      **The Offense (10:1)**

Back in chapter 8 of Leviticus Aaron and his 4 sons were consecrated as priests to serve in the tabernacle. In an elaborate ceremony they were set apart unto the LORD. Verse 34 concludes—

Leviticus 8:34–36      As he has done this day, so the LORD has commanded to do, to make atonement for you. Therefore you shall stay at the door of the tabernacle of meeting day and night for seven days, and keep the charge of the LORD, so that you may not die; for so I have been commanded.” So Aaron and his sons did all the things that the LORD had commanded by the hand of Moses.

Chapter 9 records the beginning of their ministry in the tabernacle. Aaron, as the high priest, begins to offer sacrifices, assisted by his sons. We see God displaying His power and His presence in their midst.

Leviticus 9:22–24      Then Aaron lifted his hand toward the people, blessed them, and came down from offering the sin offering, the burnt offering, and peace offerings. And Moses and Aaron went into the tabernacle of meeting, and came out and blessed the people. Then 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 fat on the altar. When all the people saw it, they shouted and fell on their faces.

The blessing of God is on the people and on the priests as they worship God in obedience to all God had commanded them through Moses.

But then, as chapter 10 begins, we read of two of Aaron’s sons, who seem to have their own ideas about how God should be worshipped. Verse 1 tells us they each took a censer and put fire on it. Now this in itself was not unusual. God instructed the priests to use the censer to carry burning coals of fire from the altar and go into the Holy Place to burn incense unto the LORD. Numbers 16:17 indicates that each priest has his own censer to serve before the LORD.

But here Aaron’s sons use their censers to do something God had **not** commanded.

It says they offered profane fire before the LORD. Some translations say “strange” fire or “unauthorized” fire. In other words, they offered **fire** that did not belong, **fire** that was foreign to the worship of God, **fire** that God did not command as part of worship in the Old Testament covenant.

So what then was the result?

## 2) God's Judgment (10:2)

We see in verse 2, God's judgment was swift. Fire went out from the LORD and devoured them—and they died before the LORD.

They brought strange fire into God's presence and the result was their immediate death.

Now, we have to ask the question here: Why was God's judgment so severe?

Try to imagine for a moment. Put yourself in Aaron's shoes. You have just gone through a wonderful time of worship inaugurating the priesthood. Your sons are serving by your side. God powerfully displays His presence accepting your first offerings upon the altar.

But then the news comes. Hurry to the tabernacle. Nadab and Abihu are dead. They have been struck down. What must Aaron have been thinking? WHY? Why LORD? How could this be?

After all, they are new at this. They are enthusiastic. They are young. They want to try their new censers. They still have a lot to learn. Why not give them a chance? Why not show mercy? Why death?

At first it may seem that this is too severe a judgment for these two young men—until we see what is at stake.

And God gives an answer in the next verse. He explains in verse 3 what is at stake.

Leviticus 10:3            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. (ESV)

## 3) God's Purpose (10:3)

He gives 2 answers here:

**First, God is holy and those who serve Him must regard Him as holy.**

To be holy is to be set apart and separate. Holiness is God's very nature. He is thrice holy—holy in a perfect degree.

Exodus 15:11            "Who is like You, O LORD, among the gods?  
Who is like You, glorious in holiness,  
Fearful in praises, doing wonders?"

God is separate from His creation, transcendent, above and beyond all.

He is separate from sin—apart from all that is evil and corrupt—He is perfectly righteous, pure, just and good.

And because He is holy, He is unapproachable by sinful people apart from the way of salvation in Christ that He Himself has provided.

He is holy in that: “Salvation is of the LORD”—and only of the LORD! He alone can provide a way to Himself, a way for sinful men and women and children to be forgiven, cleansed, reconciled and brought near. And He is holy in that He alone determines how His people are to approach Him and worship and serve Him.

**God is holy and those who serve Him must regard Him as holy.**

**But second, God must be glorified before all the people.**

It was the privilege of the priests to teach the people to worship God in holiness that He might be glorified before all.

Holiness was to be the fabric of their worship:

1 Chronicles 16:29                      Give to the LORD the glory due His name;  
Bring an offering, and come before Him.  
Oh, worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness!

God emphasized this, even in the clothing worn by the priests as they served Him. Aaron was to wear a robe as the high priest. It had a breastplate with precious stones that represented the tribes of Israel. It had golden bells around its hem so the priests would hear him as they served and went into the Most Holy Place on the Day of Atonement. And according to God’s instructions in Exodus 28:36— “You shall also make a plate of pure gold and engrave on it, like the engraving of a signet: HOLINESS TO THE LORD.”

Those who would serve before the LORD were set apart and marked out as holiness to the LORD. Aaron’s sons had disregarded God’s Word and treated God with contempt before the people, and God’s judgment was swift and severe.

So what was the aftermath? Look in verses 4–5.

Leviticus 10:4–5                      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. (ESV)

#### **4)     The Aftermath (10:4–5)**

Moses called for two sons of Uzziel to come and carry the bodies of Nadab and Abihu outside the camp. They were considered defiled, bearing the guilt of their sin, and so they were taken outside the camp. Moses follows this with a warning in verses 6–7.

Leviticus 10:6–7                      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. (ESV)

## 5) Warnings and Admonitions (10:6–11)

Aaron and his two remaining sons were not to tear their clothes or uncover their heads—acts of mourning for the dead. They were set apart to serve the LORD in His presence in the tabernacle. The nation could mourn, but not the priests who were set apart as holy to the LORD. The priests had been cleansed and fit for service in the tabernacle. They were not even to leave the door of the tabernacle, lest they die.

Aaron held his peace and did according to God’s Word, but he did not yet understand the seriousness of his sons’ sin. He did not yet grasp the gravity of what it meant to serve as priest and show the people how to distinguish between what is holy and what is not holy.

And so God, in mercy, speaks to him in verses 8–11.

Leviticus 10:8–11      And the LORD spoke to Aaron, saying, “Drink no wine or strong drink, you or your sons with you, when you go into the tent of meeting, lest you die. It shall be a statute forever throughout your generations. You are to distinguish between the holy and the common, and between the unclean and the clean, and you are to teach the people of Israel all the statutes that the LORD has spoken to them by Moses.” (ESV)

Some have suggested from these verses that Nadab and Abihu may have been drunk when went into the tabernacle. Whether or not that is true is not made clear in the text. But the two sons did sin in not regarding God and His worship as holy. They did not glorify God as God. They did not demonstrate by conduct or obedience that God and God alone is LORD and sovereign.

This is not the last time that God will bring judgment upon his priests in the Old Testament.

A similar warning is given in Ezekiel 22:26—

Ezekiel 22:26      Her priests have violated My law and profaned My holy things; they have not distinguished between the holy and unholy, nor have they made known the difference between the unclean and the clean; and they have hidden their eyes from My Sabbaths, so that I am profaned among them.

The judgment is just as severe—

Ezekiel 22:31      Therefore I have poured out My indignation on them; I have consumed them with the fire of My wrath; and I have recompensed their deeds on their own heads,” says the Lord GOD.

How then should we respond to this terrifying account?

What is God showing us here in His Word?

In conclusion I have three applications.

## APPLICATIONS

### 1) We must worship and proclaim God as holy.

God's holiness has not changed. If we are to seek God and serve God, we still need to regard Him as holy and seek His holiness. We are commanded in Hebrews 12:14 "Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord" In the New Covenant, we are called to walk in holiness and serve as kings and priests before God.

Peter speaks of this in the book of 1 Peter:

- 1 Peter 1:15–16 But as He who called you is holy, **you also be holy** in all your conduct, because it is written, "Be holy, for I am holy."
- 1 Peter 2:5 You also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, **a holy priesthood**, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.
- 1 Peter 2:9 But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, **a holy nation**, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.

We must pursue holiness and not regard the things of God as common or trivial.

Hebrews 10:26–31 gives us a stern warning.

- Hebrews 10:26–31 For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries.
- Anyone who has rejected Moses' law dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. Of how much worse punishment, do you suppose, will he be thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace? For we know Him who said, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord. And again, "The LORD will judge His people." It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

### 2) We must worship and proclaim God according to His Word.

Our worship must be according to Scripture, not according to our own preferences or prescriptions.

Leviticus 10 is an example of worshipping God in vain. False worship is giving worship to anything or anyone other than the One true God. But vain worship is worshipping the one true God, but in a way that He has not commanded or prescribed.

What things are we to include or do when we come together for corporate worship? This is an important issue to discuss. Some churches in our day are incorporating everything from weightlifting exhibitions to puppet shows and calling it worship. How do we know what to include or exclude from times of corporate worship?

We are not free to include anything that is possible or even anything that we think might be useful. If we are to worship God in Spirit and in Truth, we must look to His Word for guidance and direction as to how we are to worship. We must know the Scriptures and submit to the Scriptures.

The *London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689* provides a good explanation of this. The first chapter of the confession is about the Scriptures and it begins by saying we must look to God's Word to know how to be saved from sin and walk in a way pleasing to God. The first sentence of chapter 1 reads: "The Holy Scripture is the only sufficient, certain, and infallible rule of all saving knowledge, faith, and obedience."

Chapter 22 speaks specifically on worship. It says:

"The light of nature shows that there is a God, who is Lord and is sovereign over all. He is just, good, and does good to all; and so He is to be feared, loved, praised, called upon, trusted in, and served, with all the heart and all the soul, and with all the strength. But the acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by Himself, and so limited by His own revealed will, that He may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men, nor the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scriptures." [1689 LBC / Chapter 22; Paragraph 1]

This is what has been called the **Regulative Principle** of worship. It simply means that our worship is to be regulated by the Word of God. The Bible sets the boundaries and defines the way in which we are to seek God in worship. Worship is not something we invent in our imaginations. Worship is something God commands and regulates in His Word.

And so in our worship, when we come together, we engage in certain activities that are prescribed for our worship as New Covenant believers. We won't have time this morning to look at the Bible's instructions on these elements, but they include—

- 1) Reading of Scripture  
[1 Thessalonians 5:27; Colossians 4:16; 1 Timothy 4:13]
- 2) Teaching and Preaching of Scripture  
[1 Timothy 4:6, 13–16; 2 Timothy 4:2; Matthew 28:20; Acts 2:42; 20:7; Titus 2:15]
- 3) Public Prayer  
[1 Timothy 2:1, 8; Acts 2:42; 4:23–31]
- 4) Public Confession of Faith  
[Matthew 10:32–33; Romans 10:9; Ephesians 4:4–6]
- 5) Singing of Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs  
[Ephesians 5:19, Colossians 3:16; Matthew 26:30; 1 Corinthians 14:26]
- 6) Silent Meditation / Self-Examination  
[Psalm 46:10; 1 Corinthians 11:28; 2 Corinthians 13:5; Philippians 4:8]
- 7) The Lord's Supper  
[1 Corinthians 11:23–34; Matthew 26:26–30; Acts 2:42; 20:7]
- 8) Baptism  
[Matthew 28:19; Acts 2:41; Romans 6:3–6]

9) Gathering of Tithes and Offerings

*[Galatians 6:6; 1 Corinthians 16:1-2; 2 Corinthians 9:7]*

10) Times of Corporate Thanksgiving and Praise

Or Times of Corporate Humiliation and Prayer

*[Psalm 107; 1 Timothy 2:1; James 4:8-10; Revelation 3:1-6]*

We don't do these simply because we think they are good ideas. We do them because God gives direction in His Word, by command or precedent, that this is how we are to worship Him in the New Covenant in Christ.

Though God has given us much freedom in how we organize these elements into a worship service, our freedom must always operate within the boundary of God's Word.

Now, why is this so important? Why is it so essential that we go to God's Word and stay within the boundaries of God's Word as we determine what we are to do together in times of gathered worship? Our God is a creative God—why not just through open the doors of imagination and creativity? Why not explore new and innovative ways of bringing Him glory?

Going back to our passage in Leviticus—why do we see such severity and strictness regarding the unauthorized fire brought before the Lord?

I have already given two answers:

**1) We must worship and proclaim God as holy.**

**2) We must worship and proclaim God according to His Word.**

But also —

**3) We must worship and proclaim God in Christ alone!**

Aaron and his sons were given a momentous task—a glorious privilege. They were given a ministry that was purposed and designed by God to prepare for and point toward the glorious work of Christ Jesus, the coming Savior and Messiah. All the festivals, all the sacrifices, all the furnishings and activities in the Tabernacle and Temple were types and shadows in God's progressive revelation of His provision of salvation through the person and work of His Son.

Turn for a minute to Leviticus 1. Look at how the book of Leviticus begins—

It begins immediately with instructions on the sacrifices: the burnt offering, the grain offering, the peace offering and the sin and trespass offerings. Leviticus 1–6:7 gives specific instructions for the people as to how to bring their sacrifices.

We read in—

Leviticus 1:1–3

Now the LORD called to Moses, and spoke to him from the tabernacle of meeting, saying, "Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them: 'When any one of you brings an offering to the LORD, you shall bring

your offering of the livestock—of the herd and of the flock. “If his offering is a burnt sacrifice of the herd, let him offer a male without blemish; he shall offer it of his own free will at the door of the tabernacle of meeting before the LORD.

These instructions for the people continue until the beginning of chapter 6.

Leviticus 6:8 through chapter 7 gives instructions directed to the priests concerning their responsibilities and provisions in the sacrificial system.

Leviticus 6:8–13 Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, “Command Aaron and his sons, saying, ‘This is the law of the burnt offering: The burnt offering shall be on the hearth upon the altar all night until morning, and the fire of the altar shall be kept burning on it. And the priest shall put on his linen garment, and his linen trousers he shall put on his body, and take up the ashes of the burnt offering which the fire has consumed on the altar, and he shall put them beside the altar.

Then he shall take off his garments, put on other garments, and carry the ashes outside the camp to a clean place. And the fire on the altar shall be kept burning on it; it shall not be put out. And the priest shall burn wood on it every morning, and lay the burnt offering in order on it; and he shall burn on it the fat of the peace offerings. A fire shall always be burning on the altar; it shall never go out.

The daily sacrifices were a prominent part of the duty of the priests of the Old Testament. This prominence is underscored by the inclusion of this teaching on the sacrifices at the outset of Leviticus.

But what was so important about the sacrifices and the care needed to perform the sacrifices according to God’s prescribed order? Why was it so important that the people be taught this proper use and understanding of the sacrifices?

**It is because the sacrifices foreshadow the cross;  
And it is the cross that is central to the Gospel.**

Think for a moment about the New Testament. What stands out as the primary emphasis in the New Testament? What is at the center of Gospel message?

When you look to the New Testament, you see at the center of the Gospel, the **cross of Christ**.

Paul often emphasized this in his letters:

1 Corinthians 1:17-18 For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the Gospel, not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of no effect. For the **message of the cross** is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

1 Corinthians 2:2 For I determined not to know anything among you except **Jesus Christ and Him crucified**.

Galatians 6:14 But God forbid that I should boast except **in the cross** of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.

Paul focused on the cross. The cross stands at the center.

You can see the centrality of the cross in the Gospels as well.

When Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John wrote down the significant events in the life of Christ, often weeks or months go by in between passages in the early portions of the Gospels.

But as the accounts draw closer to the crucifixion, you can see a noticeable slowing down in the description of the events: from months and weeks to days and finally to hours as Christ is on the cross.

Even the literary design of the Gospels undergirds the significance and centrality of the cross.

So when you turn to Leviticus—to a foreshadow and foretaste of the Gospel that God revealed to His people in the Old Testament: What is its obvious emphasis?

You begin reading in these instructions for worship and find in

chapter 1: sacrifice

chapter 2: sacrifice

chapter 3: sacrifice

chapter 4: sacrifice

chapter 5: sacrifice

chapter 6: sacrifice

chapter 7: sacrifice

What is God saying to His people and the priesthood here in Leviticus?

He is driving home a truth that the priests and the Levites, as they ministered and taught, would not know anything among God's people except ***Jesus Christ and Him crucified***.

This was the sacred task of the priesthood, as they were consecrated and set apart to serve before God and the people. Now, granted, they could only teach with types and shadows. They did not have the full revelation of God that we have now in the New Testament. They did not enjoy the full light of the Gospel as it is now revealed in Christ. They were looking forward, through the sacrifices, to an event yet in the future. But that said: The emphasis is the same in both the Old and New Testaments.

The message of the cross is the power of God unto salvation; and that message of Christ and Him crucified was foreshadowed in the Old Testament as well as preached boldly and clearly in the New. Christ in the gospel is vividly at the center.

Worship in the Old Testament pointed toward and prepared for the coming of Christ. It was all about Him. The Old Testament festivals all pointed to Christ—Passover, the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Feast of First Fruits, Pentecost, the Feast of Trumpets, the Day of Atonement, the Feast of Tabernacles—all served to foreshadow, prepare for and point Old Testament Israel to Christ and what He would one day accomplish in His work of redemption—dying on the cross

and rising again from the dead—and ascending to sit at His Father’s right hand as our Mediator and Intercessor.

But in God’s design in the Old Testament, all of worship—the Temple, the sacrifices, the festivals, the psalms—all of worship did not just point to Christ, it pointed ONLY to Christ. He is God’s only provision for our salvation.

Why was this seemingly small act of Nadab and Abihu such a major sin? Why such severity in its judgment? Judgment was severe and swift, because their sin robbed Christ of glory.

There could be no strange fire added to the worship of God, because nothing can be added to Christ. We are not saved by our own efforts, by our own creativity, by what we think or bring or add. We are saved by Christ alone—His person, His death, His life, His all-sufficient work on our behalf. We must humbly and obediently bow and receive God’s provision in Christ.

**God’s judgment was severe because God’s way is narrow.**

Jesus said in John 14:6 “I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.” In Acts 4:12 Peter declares: “Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.” We must worship and proclaim God in Christ alone. Aaron and his sons were weak. Nadab and Abihu failed to serve God in holiness. But we have Savior who is without sin serving as our Great High Priest.

The writer of Hebrews points us to Christ—

Hebrews 7:25–27      Therefore He is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them. For such a High Priest was fitting for us, who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and has become higher than the heavens; who does not need daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins and then for the people’s, for this He did once for all when He offered up Himself.

This morning as we close, I encourage you, look to Christ. He alone is the way of salvation. He alone has the words of life. Don’t believe that you can fill your censers with your own ideas and ways to get to God. God has sent His own Son and we must flee to Him and stand in His righteousness alone, if we are to find hope and forgiveness and eternal life.

Let us pray.

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