

Lesson 15: Leviticus 8-10 and 21-22 Priesthood

Introduction

Leviticus: Kingdom Requirements						
Key Passage: 19:2						
1-7 Ritual	8-10 Priesthood	11-15 Purity	16-17 Atonement	18-20 Purity	21-22 Priesthood	23-27 Ritual
Sacrifices	Consecration	Ceremonial cleanliness	Substitution	Moral cleanliness	Standards	Festivals, etc...

Leviticus is a book of Kingdom requirements, the dos and don'ts of the Mosaic Covenant organized in the shape of the lamp in the holy place of the tabernacle, meaning it is a seven-part chiasm. The sections on either end teach us ritual requirements, mostly how to sacrifice and the rules of the holy festivals. Moving inward, the second pair of sections on each end teach about the priesthood. The third pair of sections on each end teach purity requirements. And in the very middle, we have the Day of Atonement.

In our last lesson, along with an overview of Leviticus, I addressed the ritual sections. In this lesson, we consider the priesthood. In doing that, we also come face to face with one of those difficult passages in the Law of Moses when God consumes with fire the two sons of Aaron. How do we understand the severity of God in some of his punishments?

The Levitical priesthood under Aaron has already begun to be established in the earlier books of the Torah in the context of the narrative. Back in Genesis, Simeon and Levi were the two brothers who avenged the rape of their sister by tricking the men of Shechem to be circumcised and then attacking them in their weakened state. It is a terrible abuse of the covenant sign. God's anger at the two brothers comes out in the prophetic blessing section of Genesis 49. They are grouped together for the blessing. And the prophecy starts this way in verse 5, "Simeon and Levi are brothers; Their swords are implements of violence." The prophecy ends in verse 7 with this, "Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce; And their wrath, for it is cruel. I will disperse them in Jacob, and scatter them in Israel." That prophecy is going to become true in two very different ways. Simeon is going to be allotted land in the very middle of the tribe of Judah, surrounded by Judah, and after the book of Judges, Simeon as a tribe basically fades away. And it just doesn't get mentioned any more. When we talk about the Southern Kingdom of Judah, we talk about Judah, and we talk about Benjamin, but we never mention Simeon. They have been scattered and dispersed among the tribes. Levi also gets scattered and dispersed but in a very different way. They become the tribe of priests. They are given cities throughout the land, but they are not given any allotment of their own. They are set apart as for special use.

The book of Exodus brings the focus back on Levi, with Moses, the most famous Levite of all, and with Aaron the brother of Moses. Aaron was the one who went out to meet Moses when he arrived back in Egypt after 40 years in Midian. Aaron then went with Moses to the elders of Israel to support Moses in the vision from the Lord to free Israel. They were inseparable throughout the ten-plague power struggle with Pharaoh. And during the telling of that story, just as the struggle with Pharaoh is getting underway in chapter 6, Moses inserted a genealogy list. And the list causes a pause in the narrative at the low point of the struggle. It is one of those times that you get to something in the Bible, and you ask, "Why is this here?" Pharaoh had pushed back hard against Moses' original request. And the exciting vision of freedom quickly turned to more pain and suffering for the Israelites. The people turn against Moses, and Moses loses hope. But in Exodus 6:1-13, God speaks words of encouragement to strengthen Moses and Aaron, giving them resolve to press back against Pharaoh, to keep going, in spite of his resistance and in spite of the loss of support from fellow Israelites. God concludes that section of encouragement with this reaffirmation of their leadership, this is Exodus 6:13, "Then the LORD spoke to Moses and to Aaron, and gave them a charge to the

sons of Israel and to Pharaoh king of Egypt, to bring the sons of Israel out of the land of Egypt.” That’s then when we get the genealogy, right after this charge in the middle of the narrative. And at first, the genealogy looks to be a list of all the elders from each of the twelve tribes, but once we come to Levi, we realize it is really all about Aaron and Moses. The first verse talks about the heads of Reuben first-born, that makes sense, second verse, Simeon, that makes sense. Then we are going to expect Levi, but it is not going to be anybody else. It is going to stay just with Levi. And he does not get one verse, Levi gets 11 verses. None of the other tribes are going to be mentioned. And the eleven verses dedicated to Levi tell us about his three sons and trace the lineage down to Moses and Aaron, and then conclude this way in 6:26-27,

²⁶ It was *the same* Aaron and Moses to whom the LORD said, “Bring out the sons of Israel from the land of Egypt according to their hosts.” ²⁷ They were the ones who spoke to Pharaoh king of Egypt about bringing out the sons of Israel from Egypt; it was *the same* Moses and Aaron.

It is kind of odd. We know it is Moses and Aaron. We are in the middle of the story about Moses and Aaron. So, what is this genealogical record doing here? It is affirming Moses and Aaron, sons of Levi, as rightful leaders of Israel, while also introducing to us the sons of Aaron who are going to form the first priesthood. The genealogy is important, because even though all Levites are set apart for the service of the tabernacle, not all Levites are to serve as priests. The line of Aaron is being set apart as special from the other Levites. And it is here in Exodus that we first get mention of his four sons, Nadab, Abihu, Eleazar, and Ithamar. This is the first family of the priesthood for Israel. Moses is the covenant mediator prophet. Miriam, his sister, is a prophetess. While Aaron and his four sons are the initial priesthood. Later in the book of Exodus in chapter 32, there is a turning point for the tribe of Levi. Up until this point they are sort of under the same blessing/curse as Simeon. But after the sin of the golden calf, even though Aaron was complicit along with all of Israel, it was the tribe of Levi that alone stood with Moses when he came down from the mountain and confronted the nation.

Now we are in Leviticus, and chapters 8-10 describe the consecration of Aaron and his sons. Up till now, Moses has done all the leading, including serving as a priest. For example, it was back on Mt. Sinai Moses was the one who took the blood of the sacrifice when covenant was cut with Israel, and he sprinkled that blood on the altar, and he sprinkled that blood on the people. Moses was serving as priest. But Moses’ priestly role was only intended to be a temporary function by God until he gave instructions for the makeup of the ongoing priesthood. And then the priesthood was going to shift to Aaron. God has now given those requirements, and he has designating Aaron and his sons as the line of the priests. And so, it is time for consecration.

The consecration of Aaron and his sons is the moment of transition of all priestly responsibility from Moses to Aaron. From here on out it is going to be Aaron and his sons who perform the duties of priests. And so, they dress in the priestly garments, and several sacrifices are made to ritually purify the altar and to purify Aaron and his sons. And they are commanded to remain in the tabernacle tent for 7 days, which they do. Then they will come out and make sacrifice for all of Israel. And that completes the transition. Moses facilitated the sacrifices for Aaron and his sons, now Moses has stepped aside, and Aaron makes sacrifice for the people as his first act in the role of high priest.

God makes the moment very memorable. Previously, God had affirmed Moses through fire on the mountain and by speaking out the ten commandments and by causing his radiance to shine on the face of Moses. God also chooses now to act with power to affirm Aaron as his priest. Listen to how God completes the ceremony of atonement for the people in Leviticus 9:22-24,

²² Then Aaron lifted up his hands toward the people and blessed them, and he stepped down after making the sin offering and the burnt offering and the peace offerings. ²³ Moses and Aaron went into the tent of meeting. When they came out and blessed the people, the glory of the LORD appeared to all the people. ²⁴ Then fire came out from before the LORD and consumed the burnt offering and the portions of fat on the altar; and when all the people saw *it*, they shouted and fell on their faces.

It is glorious. But tragically, really tragically, this glorious beginning of the priesthood is immediately turned sour. We read about it in the very next verses. This is 10:1-3.

¹ Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, took their respective firepans, and after putting fire in them, placed incense on it and offered strange fire before the LORD, which He had not commanded them. ² And fire came out from the presence of the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD. ³ Then Moses said to Aaron, "It is what the LORD spoke, saying, 'By those who come near Me I will be treated as holy, And before all the people I will be honored.'" So Aaron, therefore, kept silent.

Wow. Aaron's own sons, Moses' nephews, Nadab and Abihu improvised a little with incense in the holy place and fire comes from the LORD, just as it had on the burnt offering a moment before and consumes them. What's going on here? How is this the same God our Lord Jesus Christ, who eats with sinners and outcasts, who is compassionate and gracious? God had told Moses of the danger of his holiness, but he also proclaimed himself gracious and compassionate and slow to anger, full of lovingkindness and truth. Is this how it is going to be with God? Is God so severe in his wrath against those who break his commands? Is this what it is going to be like to be an Israelite, living a life of fear, not knowing when you will step out of line and get struck down by fire?

This is not the only example of God's severity in the Pentateuch. There are only two narrative sections in Leviticus. And both of them have such a story. This is the priesthood section. There is another story in the second ritual section at the end of the book. Leviticus 24:10-23 tells of a man who blasphemes the name of God. And God commands Moses to have him stoned to death. There is another incident in Numbers 15:32-36 where a man goes out to pick up sticks on the Sabbath. He is also stoned to death. What is the right way to approach these stories? How should we consider them?

My Heart Attitude Towards The Hard Passages of Scripture

One move a lot of people make is to disassociate these stories from the truth revealed in Jesus as belonging to the God of a different era. This is the God of Moses, not the God of Jesus. But that kind of thinking immediately falls apart. Ananias and Saphira are struck down dead for lying in Acts 5 after the resurrection of Jesus and the beginning of the church by the God of the New Covenant. You get to the book of Revelation and it describes for us the Lamb of God returning in glory on a white horse bearing a sword which he will use to slay the armies of the earth. The Lamb is also the Lion. There may be a different tone to the New Covenant. I think there is. But we do not explain the newness of the New Covenant by attributing to God a split personality or by ignoring the wrathful parts of the New Testament. So, we don't create a God of wrath and judgment in the Old Covenant and a God of peace and love and grace in the New Covenant. We need to consider more thoughtfully what is going on here, not only to understand the Old Covenant but also to understand our New Covenant better. Wrath and justice belong to both covenants just as love and mercy belong to both covenants because these are attributes of God, and he is the same yesterday and today and forever.

I think it is right to be shocked or disturbed by the severity of God here in these instances. There is a potential problem here. How can a God of love and grace demand death for such things as these, blasphemy and Sabbath breaking and innovation in worship? What kind of religion is this? It is not wrong to be emotionally disturbed by the stories. Personally, I think there is a problem if we are not disturbed when we talk about the wrath of God. How can we read of the fiery death of Moses' sons and not be a bit shaken? But then what do we do with that? Where do I go in my mind and in my heart when I am troubled by Scripture? Do I believe that my view of sin, my view of wrath, my view of what is right and just and pure is actually right and accurate? Do I trust in my perspective of justice and fairness? Do I believe that my sense of compassion is greater than God's sense of compassion? When I am saying, "God this is not compassionate. You are not compassionate enough." What am I really saying?

So, when passages like this unsettle me, I do not want to allow those feelings to lead me into an attitude where I am ultimately placing myself in judgment over the Word of God and over God

himself as if I believe in my own heart and my own character enough to say that I know justice better than God knows justice. I know compassion better than God knows compassion. That is absolutely not true. I know God is good. I know God is compassionate. I know God is holy and just. And I know that something is skewed out of place in my own heart. I see in my daily dealings with people that I am not that gracious. I am more likely to be sentimental a movie than I am to be compassionate at a person in need. I also know that I do not understand how deeply sin offends the goodness of God. I am much more likely to want revenge than to want righteous justice. So, when I come to passages of Scripture like this, I need to come humbly, recognizing that my own perspective and heart and emotions are not in line always with what is right. And I need to ask two basic questions. (1) what am I not understanding about the text? Am I getting it wrong? Am I not seeing something here? And (2) what am I not understanding about the character of God? I want to come to the Scripture with the awareness that God is more righteous, mysterious, and dangerous than I realize, while at the same time he is more loving, compassionate, and gracious than I realize. I want to humble myself before the hard texts of Scripture. I want to address them intellectually and emotionally.

And in the end, I do not have to understand it. If I don't get it, I don't get it. I do not have to make up an answer. Some problems just remain. But I do want to try. I want to try to understand God and to try to understand truth. So, let's do that. Let's try to understand a little better what is going on here. Why does God take the lives of Nadab and Abihu?

The Responsibilities of the Levitical Priesthood

We need to consider the responsibilities of the Levitical priesthood. God set the Levites apart from the rest of the tribes of Israel for particular service. We have been building up to that in Genesis and Exodus and Leviticus. We will be told explicitly that God set Levi aside for a special purpose in Numbers 3:1-13 and Deuteronomy 10:6-9. In Numbers 3, God is going to tell Moses that all the first-born sons of all the tribes of Israel belong to him because he spared their lives during the Passover of Egypt when he put to death the sons of Egypt. God then allows a symbolic buying back of each first-born son of Israel. They are redeemed from God, bought back. And the price of that redemption for one first-born son of Israel is one Levite. So, all of the Levites are taken as a symbolic payment for all the first-born sons of Israel. The Levites have this special identity. They are taken by God as payment for Israel, and then they are set aside for a special purpose. And these are the responsibilities of a special group of Levites who are the priests, the sons of Aaron. These are their responsibilities.

- (1) First, they are to perform the service of the tabernacle. They prepare the bread, the lamp, and the incense in the holy place. They preside over the daily rituals, the sacrifices brought by the common people and the ceremonies of the feast days.
- (2) Second, the priests teach the law, as Moses says here in Leviticus 10:11, they are to keep themselves from strong drink, "so as to teach the sons of Israel all the statutes which the LORD has spoken to them through Moses."
- (3) Third, they are to serve as mediators between God and the Israelites, reminding the people of the separation between the holiness of God and the sinfulness of man. This is the language of Leviticus 10:10, "they are to make a distinction between the holy and the profane, between the clean and the unclean." The priests are not more spiritual or more holy in character or in soul as human beings. They are more holy symbolically. For this reason, though Israelites are involved in bringing sacrifice to the tabernacle and even in killing the animal they bring, they cannot approach the altar. The priests must take over at the entryway of the tabernacle, serving as mediators between the people who stand outside and God who dwells in the Holy of Holies.
- (4) Fourth, the priests are to facilitate the purity laws that have to do with cleanliness and food and ritual and sickness. The priests apply the laws of cleanliness to the people to help the people know that they are ritually clean in the eyes of God.
- (5) Fifth, the priests are to help judge disputes. That responsibility is commanded in Deuteronomy 21:5.

So, here is that list again: fulfill the tabernacle service, teach the Scripture, serve as mediators, facilitate the purity code, and judge disputes. Because of the special responsibilities of the priests, mediating, teaching, judging, they are also held to a higher standard of behavior. That is in the second priesthood section in Leviticus towards the end. Chapters 21-22 begin this way “Speak to the priests, the sons of Aaron, and say to them...” And the commands that follow have to do with special requirements that go above and beyond the requirements expected of the normal Israelites, of everybody else. God has set Levi apart to represent him. And so, they are called to a high standard of ritual law. It is worth noting that these standards are almost all ritual standards, not moral standards. All Israelites are to pursue the highest of moral standards. God is not trying to establish a distinction between more moral priests and less moral laypeople or more spiritual priests and less spiritual laypeople.

And I should emphasize this point because it is an ongoing problem that persists through the time of Israel into the time of Christianity and in all forms of Christianity. Whether priest or missionary, pastor, monk, or nun, it is quite tempting to view professional Christians as somehow more moral or more spiritual. Like that is their job, to be better. There is a blessing that comes from having a vocation that allows for a focus on God’s word. I admit that. I love that I get to spend so much of my time in God’s Word or in vocation focusing on worship or prayer or evangelism. Jesus did expect people to show respect to his apostles when he sent them out. God expected his priests to be treated with respect in their role. Paul says that an elder who serves well deserves honor. But the roles and responsibilities are one thing, character, moral behavior, spiritual dependency on the Lord, those are something else, something available to and expected of all God’s people who seek after his heart.

In Exodus 19:6 God says that he has set apart the whole nation as a kingdom of priests, holy to him. The priests have a special responsibility to teach, but Deuteronomy 6 is also going to place that responsibility in the home. Moms and Dads are supposed to teach the stories, the doctrines, the behaviors to their children when they are sitting in their home or walking along the way. They don’t just leave it to the priest to teach. The priest has a special role as a mediator, but every Israelite serves as a mediator when he helps his brother or sister worship or when he shares the knowledge of God with someone who does not know God. So, the priests have a special role as mediator, but everybody mediates to some degree. Also, the priest has a special role as judge, but every Israelite can help resolve disputes with his neighbor, to seek to establish peace before you have to appeal to a more formal judge. The priests have a special role, but that role is not meant to take away personal responsibility for each person to serve God with their lives and to pursue spiritual relationship with God. They are not to be more moral or more spiritual. That is not the point of the priesthood.

The Background of the Golden Calf

Having said that, there is the special role for the Levites to play, a very special role of leadership. Nadab and Abihu have just been appointed as mediators, teachers, and judges of Israel. During their consecration ceremony, in Leviticus 8:35, Moses tells them, “You shall remain day and night for seven days and keep the charge of the LORD, so that you will not die, for so I have been commanded.” God’s words are meant to impress on Aaron and his sons the seriousness of their role. Do what you have been commanded, so that you will not die!

The text leading up to the punishment of Nadab and Abihu connects us back to the golden calf incident. They were present during the worship of the golden calf. Less than a year has passed, maybe 9 months. Their father Aaron had directly participated in reformulating the worship of Yahweh pressured by the people. In so doing, he had rejected the doctrine just delivered on Mount Sinai, breaking the covenants in making a god that would fit the sensibilities and desires of the Israelite people. God’s anger burned like a consuming fire at that remolding of the truth which he had delivered from the mountain top. After Moses came down, there was a fight in the camp and many died. And after that fight, God relented and withheld his anger from Aaron and Aaron’s sons and all the people. And then God, declares his name, “gracious and compassionate, slow to anger,

full of lovingkindness and truth.” Moses goes back up on the mountain to renew covenant. And when he comes down again, we had that long repeat of the tabernacle details as the tabernacle was being constructed. And the repetition created anticipation, moving slowly towards the event of God’s presence coming to dwell in the tabernacle. In approaching that moment of indwelling, a refrain began to appear over and over in the text. Do you remember what it was? What did the text keep saying over and over? They completed the hem of the priest’s garment “just as the LORD had commanded Moses.” They fastened a cord for the priest’s turban “just as the LORD had commanded Moses,” with each detail, “just as the LORD had commanded Moses.” That was the refrain. Instead of creating the tabernacle out of their own minds and their own vision of what true worship should be, they build it “just as the LORD had commanded Moses.” That is what they learned from the golden calf. We don’t innovate this religion. This is God’s truth. That same refrain is picked up again in Leviticus 8-9 as the priests go through the ceremony of consecration. They performed the ceremony “just as the LORD commanded Moses.” Those words are repeated 6 times here. The text is very clear. This is not a time for improvisation, not after the golden calf, not after the LORD has said, “Do exactly as I tell you so that you do not die.” But in spite of that clear direction, Nadab and Abihu improvise. They take authority on themselves to change up the ceremony of worship from the very first moment after they had been appointed to the priesthood.

This is the text of punishment, 10:1-2,

¹ Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, took their respective firepans, and after putting fire in them, placed incense on it and offered strange fire before the LORD, **which He had not commanded them.** ² And fire came out from the presence of the LORD **and consumed them,** and they died before the LORD.

Contrary to the previous text in which they did “just as the LORD commanded Moses,” here the text says they did that, “which he had not commanded them.” And contrary to how God relented from his consuming anger after the golden calf incident, here the fire of God’s anger “consumes them.” The bush wasn’t consumed. Nadab and Abihu, they are consumed. Reading just this narrative, if we just look at this, we might feel like God’s wrath is fickle or rash. But when we put it into the larger context, we see that is not the case. God is slow to anger. He did not demand Aaron’s life or the life of the sons after the golden calf rebellion. After that great failure by Aaron and the people, God communicated quite clearly his expectations that all be done just as he commanded. God even warned them directly, precisely that death would come if they did not do as commanded. And even after all that, they took the liberty to change the incense and the ceremony.

As we consider this text, we also have to take into account that it is not just about Nadab and Abihu. They have just been given the priestly responsibilities of mediator, teacher, and judge. God has called Israel to be different, to be set apart, to establish their society on a true and good understanding of reality. God is showing them what is beautiful and true and good. The sons of Aaron are given a great responsibility and wonderful opportunity to help guide Israel in a vision that brings life. And yet, they chose death. And I do not mean they chose their death, though they did, I mean they chose the way of death. They chose, almost immediately, to turn away from the way that God had set out for them and instead choose to reformulate the worship of God according to their own minds, their own thinking.

The Heart Attitude of Nadab and Abihu

A principle of biblical narrative that we have already looked at in this series is that God sees into the hearts of men, and he acts on that knowledge even when that state of heart is not communicated to us who are reading the text. We do not always hear, we do not always get all the information that God uses in order to act. We have to infer it based on how God does act. Why did God respond so graciously to Abraham’s questioning of the covenant? Well, because God saw a struggling heart of true faith, not a hardened heart of resistance. Why does God strike down Nadab and Abihu? I assume that God saw something in their hearts he did not like. They did not just make an honest mistake. This is not like an altar boy lighting a candle at the wrong time in the service and then

getting struck dead. They made a choice to come up with their own version of the service, after being given all these warnings, and in heart they were doing exactly the same thing that the Israelites had done in molding of the golden calf.

The narrative quickly brings up another example of this principle of God judging according to the heart. So Aaron and his other two sons must continue with the atonement ceremony for the people and in doing that the surviving sons allow the portion of the purification goat, which they were supposed to eat, to be burned up on the altar. Moses looks for the portion of the sacrificed goat, because he knows they are supposed to eat it. And he is not happy at all when he discovered what happened. That they let it be burned up. And Moses says this to Eleazar and Ithamar in Leviticus 10:17-18,

¹⁷ “Why did you not eat the sin offering at the holy place? For it is most holy, and He gave it to you to bear away the guilt of the congregation, to make atonement for them before the LORD.

¹⁸ Behold, since its blood had not been brought inside, into the sanctuary, you should certainly have eaten it in the sanctuary, **just as I commanded.**”

Notice here Moses uses that phrase again, “just as I commanded.” They were supposed to do this. These two sons did not follow the ceremony requirements exactly the way they had been instructed to do. And Aaron responds back to Moses in verses 19-20,

¹⁹ But Aaron spoke to Moses, “Behold, this very day they presented their sin offering and their burnt offering before the LORD. When things like these happened to me, if I had eaten a sin offering today, would it have been good in the sight of the LORD?” ²⁰ When Moses heard *that*, it seemed good in his sight.

So, we do not get all the detail of what Aaron is saying. We need to read it in context. He is basically saying, “How could they be expected to eat their part of the offering on the same day that their brothers were consumed by the fire of the LORD?” It is a change in the ceremony. But it is a change that does not go against the intent of the ceremony or against the heart of the Lord. It is not intended as an improvisation of the ceremony. It is not like they want to do this again. Their brothers had just died. And Eleazar and Ithamar had not stopped to grieve. They kept going with the ceremony, the atonement for the people. They accepted the Lord’s just judgment, and they continued. But they were grieving. And in their grief, they could not bring themselves to eat the portion of the sacrifice set apart for them. And just as God saw the rebellious intent of Nadab and Abihu, and he responded severely, he also saw the grieving hearts of Eleazar and Ithamar, and he does not respond with punishment.

A disrespect for God’s authority was present in the heart of the first two brothers. The punishment executed on them was not just about them as individuals. It was also about protecting the people of God from the perversion of truth by the priests of God. The Lord knows that Israel will suffer plenty from evil priests. It is a reason for the rise of the prophets later in Israel to challenge the false teaching and practices of kings and priests who go astray. But here at the start of it all, we are in an especially tenuous time. We need the Word of God to be completed by Moses. He has got to finish writing in down, and he has got to put it into the hands of priests who will keep it safe and copy it and teach it and make sure it is passed on. Treason is always taken seriously. Treason during a time of war is taken deadly serious. This transition from Egypt to Canaan, from slave people to nation, is like a time of war. Israel will be under attack from without on its way to Canaan, and when it gets to Canaan. And it is under threat from within. We saw that with the golden calf. The strange fire offered by the two brothers is a form of treason. It is rebellion against the clear commands of God by two men who were supposed to teach the Word of God to other people. But how can they teach it when they are reformulating it themselves. They are making it up as they go.

The strange fire offered by the two brothers reminds me of the protestant seminary president, I referred to in the last lesson. She is that Christian leader who told the New York Times columnist that it does not matter whether Jesus lived or died or was ever raised from the dead. Doesn’t matter. The point of the story of Jesus is that love never dies. She went on to claim that the virgin birth is

oppressive toward women and that we have no idea whether there is an afterlife or not. And you are weak in faith if that is important to you. And I am left wondering how many people are being led away from salvation, from new birth in Christ, from eternal life with God because of the leadership of this woman? She has taken the job of training men and women to go out into Christian ministry with this newly molded version of Christianity that reworks the biblical text into an unrecognizable form? So, not only is she participating in the corruption or leading astray of the people who come to be trained in her school. But people are going to attend churches and hear a false message that keeps people bound to the way of eternal death, because this woman feels free to remold Scripture into a form pleasing to her and to her society. What should God's response be to such a person who takes on herself the authority to reformulate the gospel of Jesus Christ and then teach it to others who are going to go out and teach it to others. What should God do to someone like that? She may not be struck down in this life by fire. God is slow in his anger. He is patient. But she should take heart to the words of John in the last paragraph of the Bible.

¹⁸ I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues which are written in this book; ¹⁹ and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his part from the tree of life and from the holy city, which are written in this book.

We do not mold the truth into our own image. We receive the truth from God. God's removal of Nadab and Abihu from the priestly leadership of Israel was not just about Nadab and Abihu. It was a mercy to Israel to remove them from a place of teaching.

Two Other Examples of Severe Punishment

The other two examples of God's severity that I mentioned involve the stoning of two average Israelites. They are not priests. They are just normal people. The man in Leviticus 24:10-23 is stoned for blaspheming the name of God. The man in Numbers 15:32-36 is stoned for gathering wood on the Sabbath. These examples also stand as shocking for the severity of God in the punishment. But I would suggest that one reason they stand out as shocking is that, in fact, they are rather rare and isolated judgments in the record of Scripture. There will be quite a bit of punishment in the book of Numbers against this first generation that comes out of Egypt that continues to grumble against God. So, there will be punishment on the people as a whole. But as we move through the rest of the Old Testament, we encounter regular and consistent failure by God's people to resist temptations to idolatry and immorality. But if the sentence of death was literally carried out every time an adult son cursed his parents or a woman cursed God or an Israelite broke the Sabbath, then we should see the death penalty enforced all the time. And we do not see that. It could be that it is just not recorded. But even when we do have a record of Israelites breaking the law, the death penalty is rarely the enacted as the punishment in the text of Scripture. Quite possibly, the death penalty was considered the maximum punishment, a just punishment for the crimes it is connect to, but judges had the right to determine whether or not to give the maximum sentence. That is how it actually plays out in Israel, the records we have of judgments. We could argue whether that was God's intention or not. Maybe God intended that they give the maximum penalty every time. But it does not appear to be that way. Whatever the reason, the Old Testament record just simply does not show regular enforcement of the death penalty for blasphemy or for Sabbath breaking, for laws like that. So, I can only give you these two examples that really stand out as shocking. But part of the reasons they are shocking is that they stand out as unusual.

I believe the most important detail about our context here in the Pentateuch is that we are in a crucial, transitional time for Israel, what I just called a time of war. The first generation of adults out of Egypt is deeply influenced by Egyptian society, which primes them to connect with and accept much of Canaanite society when they get there. Their hearts are aligned with a way of death. God is reforming the culture to a way of life. The holy seriousness of God and the authority of Moses must be upheld in order to bring about reformation. The Word of God is being formulated. It is not yet

written down and accepted as authoritative. God requires the maximum penalty in these cases because of the tenuousness of this transitional time out of Egypt, moving into the promise land. That is my opinion.

I believe the situation is similar to the punishment of Ananias and Saphira. Here it is the birth of Israel, there it is the birth of the church. Here God is formulating the Torah through Moses, there God is formulating the New Testament through the apostles. Both of these are crucial times, the birth of the church, the birth of Israel. And God chose severe punishment to establish the authority of Moses and the authority of the apostles, the authority of his Word. We are not playing around here. This is truth. This is the way of life. If we go wrong on this, we are leading thousands to death. We cannot be priests who hold out life, if we reject the gospel of life. We need to clearly establish the Word of God during these times of transition, so that we can preach it during times of peace.

And I am not saying that God just chose these individuals to make a point. The punishment was announced ahead of time. And God saw what was going on in the hearts of these men who committed these transgressions. I believe God was righteous in his judgment, wise in his choice of punishment. But I am saying why he did not choose leniency or mercy in these cases. I am saying that it had very much to do with the time of crucial transition that the society is going through.

The Priest as Mediator

As a closing point, I want to turn back to the idea of the priesthood in the Mosaic Covenant to clarify something I said about the responsibilities of priests.

In the Old Covenant, God did intentionally establish an additional barrier between himself and the typical believer. The tabernacle contributed to this barrier, since only priests could enter. And the priesthood contributed to this barrier. The priests served as mediators. They received the sacrifice from the worshiper and then carried it for the worshiper to the altar. And in this, we need to remember that the tabernacle and the priests were both symbolic. The real tabernacle, the real mediator exist in the spiritual reality of God. The physical tabernacle, the physical priesthood are meant to be symbolic. We could say that the Mosaic rituals produce shadows of a spiritual reality. Something that is truly real.

The author of the letter to the Hebrews says this in 8:4-5,

⁴ Now if [Jesus] were on earth, He would not be a priest at all, since there are those who offer the gifts according to the Law; ⁵ who serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly things,

The ritual performed by the priest is symbolic. It is meant to point the Israelites to something else. God established the priesthood and the tabernacle as a barrier between himself and his people until that time when he would actually make the sacrifice of atonement that truly pays for sin. Until the real event happens on the cross, God maintains the symbolic barrier. This is Hebrews 9:8-10,

⁸ The Holy Spirit *is* signifying this, that the way into the holy place has not yet been disclosed while the outer tabernacle is still standing, ⁹ which *is* a symbol for the present time. Accordingly both gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot make the worshiper perfect in conscience, ¹⁰ since they *relate* only to food and drink and various washings, regulations for the body imposed until a time of reformation.

So, when we talk about the mediator function of the priest, there is both a sense in which the priest does act as a mediator between God and man and a sense in which he cannot act as the true mediator between God and man. There is a sense in which a person can help mediate between another person and God. You can help a person experience the forgiveness of God. You can help a person by turning them to the truth of God. You can help a person express gratitude to God. And that function can be served by a priest, also it can be served by a regular person. But in the other sense of being mediator, in the sense of actually providing a way for a person to come to God, there is only one mediator who can do that, who can truly establish a way to God. Paul makes that point

clear in 1 Timothy 2:5 “For there is one God, *and* one mediator also between God and men, *the* man Christ Jesus.” And this is also the point of the writer of Hebrews in 7:26-28.

²⁶ For it was fitting for us to have such a high priest, holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners and exalted above the heavens; ²⁷ who does not need daily, like those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins and then for the *sins* of the people, because this He did once for all when He offered up Himself. ²⁸ For the Law appoints men as high priests who are weak, but the word of the oath, which came after the Law, *appoints* a Son, made perfect forever.

Like the sinful and struggling line of David that never succeeds in producing a true and good and holy king, so also the line of Aaron never succeeds in producing a true and good and holy high priest. Human priests, year after year, must offer up sacrifice for their own sin, and only then can they offer up sacrifice for people, reminding us that the priests are only symbolic mediators. They are sinful men unable to provide for their own way to God, much less provide a way for other people. There are no saints, no priests, no humans who can help you gain access to the Holy of Holies. The priesthood and tabernacle created a barrier between God and man to remind us that something real must take place if we are to have true relationship with God and walk in his life. The real has happened. Jesus Christ is the high priest who does not have to offer sacrifice for his own sin because he has none. He is the one who has made a way by offering up the perfect sacrifice, himself. He is the good and holy, infinite man who laid down his life for all people. And like God took each Levite as a symbolic payment to redeem the life of each first-born Israelite son spared in Egypt, so, Jesus is the real payment to redeem the life of every human child, man or woman who places their faith in him. We do not stand outside at the entrance to the courtyard anymore. We are welcomed all the way in to the presence of God. The barrier has been torn because the real has come and has given his life as payment for sin. There is no more need for symbolic sacrifice when the true sacrifice has been made.

Reflection Questions

1. What stands out to you as you read Leviticus 8-10? What do you notice as interesting or important or strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
2. What language stands out in this narrative about Nadab and Abihu that connects back to the burning bush, the golden calf, and the tabernacle construction in Exodus?
3. How does that language help frame the seriousness of what Nadab and Abihu have done?
4. What two or three truths help you to understand God’s severe punishment of Nadab and Abihu?
5. Chapters 21-22 describe higher standards for the Levitical priests. How does this apply to full-time Christian workers today, to ministers and to missionaries, or to laypeople holding positions in church, such as elder or deacon or Sunday school leader or youth worker? Do you believe that those entrusted with special roles should be held to higher accountability? Why or why not?