

I Will Be Sanctified

Leviticus 10:1 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.

² And fire came out from before the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD.

³ Then Moses said to Aaron, "This is what the LORD has said: 'Among those who are near me I will be sanctified [hallowed], and before all the people I will be glorified.'" And Aaron held his peace.

⁴ 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."

⁵ So they came near and carried them in their coats out of the camp, as Moses had said.

⁶ 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.

⁷ 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.

⁸ And the LORD spoke to Aaron, saying,

⁹ "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.

¹⁰ You are to distinguish between the holy and the common, and between the unclean and the clean,

¹¹ and you are to teach the people of Israel all the statutes that the LORD has spoken to them by Moses."

¹² Moses spoke to Aaron and to Eleazar and Ithamar, his surviving sons: "Take the grain offering that is left of the LORD's food offerings, and eat it unleavened beside the altar, for it is most holy.

¹³ You shall eat it in a holy place, because it is your due and your sons' due, from the LORD's food offerings, for so I am commanded.

¹⁴ But the breast that is waved and the thigh that is contributed you shall eat in a clean place, you and your sons and your daughters with you, for they are given as your due and your sons' due from the sacrifices of the peace offerings of the people of Israel.

¹⁵ The thigh that is contributed and the breast that is waved they shall bring with the food offerings of the fat pieces to wave for a wave offering before the LORD, and it shall be yours and your sons' with you as a due forever, as the LORD has commanded."

¹⁶ Now Moses diligently inquired about the goat of the sin offering, and behold, it was burned up! And he was angry with Eleazar and Ithamar, the surviving sons of Aaron, saying,

¹⁷ "Why have you not eaten the sin offering in the place of the sanctuary, since it is a thing most holy and has been given to you that you may bear the iniquity of the congregation, to make atonement for them before the LORD?

¹⁸ Behold, its blood was not brought into the inner part of the sanctuary. You certainly ought to have eaten it in the sanctuary, as I commanded."

¹⁹ And Aaron said to Moses, "Behold, today they have offered their sin offering and their burnt offering before the LORD, and yet such things as these have happened to me! If I had eaten the sin offering today, would the LORD have approved?"

²⁰ And when Moses heard that, he approved.

(Lev 10:1-20)

A Question of Context

If God is holy and we are not, what is to happen when the Holy comes into proximity to the profane? This is the lesson of **Leviticus 10:1-2** where, even though two men had been set apart as holy, they nevertheless went before the LORD in the **profanity of their strange fire**, and consuming flames arose from the Most Holy Place, engulfed their own fire, then their bodies, and they died.

But why is this story here? This is a question I've not yet addressed. Frankly, it is a question very few have asked, and when they have, it has been a riddle wrapped in a mystery wrapped in an enigma. But there is an answer, and it is actually rather mind-blowing. When you discover it, I believe it will work on your **heart and mind** in ways you have never imagined.

Screens in Sanctuaries

To move towards the answer, you have to first understand a little something about **the architecture of a biblical sanctuary**. Most basically, sanctuaries are three-tiered structures divided off with two partitions, with the

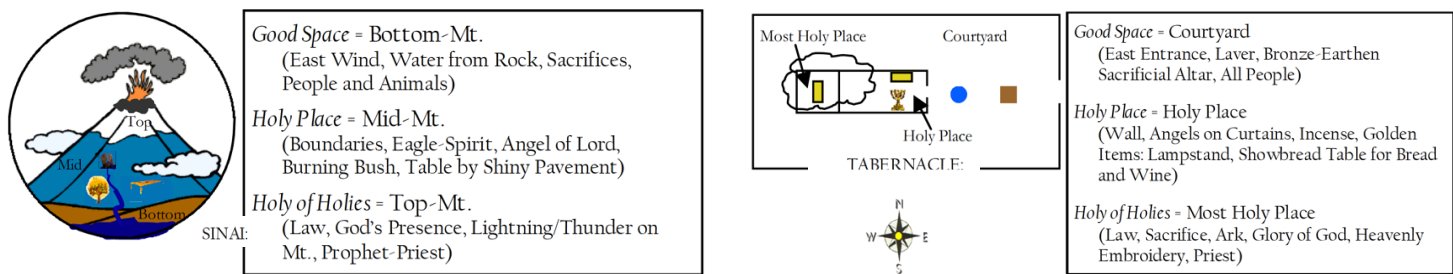
center always being the holiest part.¹ You can see this as early as Genesis 1-2 where God makes the [heavens and earth](#) which are “separated” from one another and then the Garden which is likewise separated from the earth. You can see it in the [Garden](#) itself where you have the outside world, then the land of Eden, and the Garden in the center. You can see it in [Noah’s ark](#), which is built as a three-story boat.

Importantly, for what we will look at later, you can see it at [Mt. Sinai](#). This seems strange, because we are used to thinking of that mountain from ground perspective. But if you were to fly over [the top of it](#), you would see that its top becomes the center, the mountain becomes the middle area, and the land around it becomes the third. Importantly, the mountain was forbidden to be crossed by any except the Moses, Aaron, [Nadab, Abihu](#), and the seventy elders. But the top was forbidden to all but Moses.

This [threefold division](#) is most obviously seen, however, in the [tabernacle](#) and later temple where you have the outside [Courtyard](#), the [Holy Place](#), and the [Most Holy Place](#). In most of these sanctuaries, each space gets smaller as you move to the center. In the tabernacle, each “Holy Place”

¹ For much more on this see my book *Waters of Creation: A Biblical-Theological Study of Baptism* (Erie, CO: Waters of Creation Pub., 2009).

is separated by a curtain or screen such that this obstacle marks off the progressively holy space, the closer you come to Yahweh’s special presence on the ark of the covenant, where he sits enthroned.



What does this have to do with Leviticus? Recall that the very first verse of the book begins with God speaking from the tent of meeting. The whole book then deals with the space inside the tabernacle. Then recall that when I introduced the book, I said that scholars have noticed that the laws of the book take place in an order that parallels the three-fold structure, starting in the Courtyard, then into the Holy Place, then the Most Holy Place.

Leviticus Spatial Movement			
Courtyard	Holy Place	Most Holy Place	Ark
Lev 1-7	Lev 8-12	Lev 16-18	Lev 19
	Lev 22:26-24	Lev 20-22:25	
Lev 25-27			
Modified from Moshe Kline, "The Literary Structure of Leviticus," <i>The Biblical Historian</i> 2/3 (2006): 20 [1-28].			

In this way, placement of the laws mirrors the structure of the tabernacle itself.

But that's not all. Someone has noticed, "Leviticus consists almost entirely of divine laws. It is interrupted twice by narratives, only twice, and both about encroachment on the divine prerogative."² This is very important to answering our question. There are only two narratives (stories) in the entire book. Everything else is law-code. Both stories end violently. The first is the unexpected and terrifying judgment of God upon the two oldest sons of Aaron: Nadab and Abihu (Lev 10:1-3). The second is the story of the blasphemer who was stoned to death at the command of Yahweh (24:10-23). Why these and no other stories?

I find one explanation very fascinating. It comes by way of two features of ancient writing. The first is called the "pattern poem." This is where a poem's words and length are designed to create a visual pattern of something tangible in the world when you write it out on paper. For example, the poet Dosiadas created a poem called *The First Altar* which, when written down, literally forms the shape of an altar (Douglas, 198).

² Mary Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 195.



ΔΟΣΙΑΔΑ ΔΩΡΙΕΩΣ ΒΩΜΟΣ

Εἰμάρσενός με στήτας
πύσας, μέροφ' δίσσας,
τεύξ', οὐ σποδεύσας ἴνις Ἑμπούσας μέρος
Τεύκροιο βούτα καὶ κυνὸς τεκνώματος,
χρυσαῖ δ' αἶτας, ἄμος ἐφάνδρα
τὸν γυνόχαλκον οὐρον ἔρραισεν,
ὄν ἀπάτωρ δίσσεως
μόγησε ματρώριπτος·
ἐμὸν δὲ τεύγμ' ἀθρήσας
Θεοκρίτοιο κτάντας
τριεστέροιο καύστας
θούσεν αἶν' ἰύξας
χάλεψε γὰρ νιν ἰῶ
σέργαστρος ἐκδυγίρας
τὸν δ' αἰλυνεῖν· ἐν ἀμφικλύστῳ
Πανὸς τε ματρὸς εὐνέτας φῶρ
διζῶος ἴνις τ' ἀνδροβρώτος Ἰλαριστῶν
ἦρ' ἀρδίων ἐς Τευκρίδ' ἀγαγὼν τρίπορθον.

DOSIADAS THE FIRST ALTAR

THIS puzzle is written in the Iambic metre and composed of two pairs of complete lines, five pairs of half-lines, and two pairs of three-quarter lines, arranged in the form of an altar. Of the writer nothing is known; he was obviously acquainted with the Pipe and also with Lycophron's Alexandra. The poem is mentioned by Lucian (Lexiph. 25), but metrical considerations point to its being of considerably later date than the Pipe. Moreover, the idea of making an altar of verses presupposes a change in the conception of what a poem is. It was now a thing of ink and paper; and Dosiadas seems to have interpreted the Pipe in the light of the pipes of his own time, as representing the outward appearance of an actual pipe.

While Leviticus is not a poem, it is doing something similar. How so?

In this way. “If these two violent events are major markers for the structure of Leviticus, they divide the book into three parts, large, small, and smaller.”³ These are divided into Ch. 1-17, which consists of the largest part, 19-24 the middle length, and 25-27 are the smallest unit. What ancient artifact might it be emulating in its design and structure? The answer is the tabernacle.

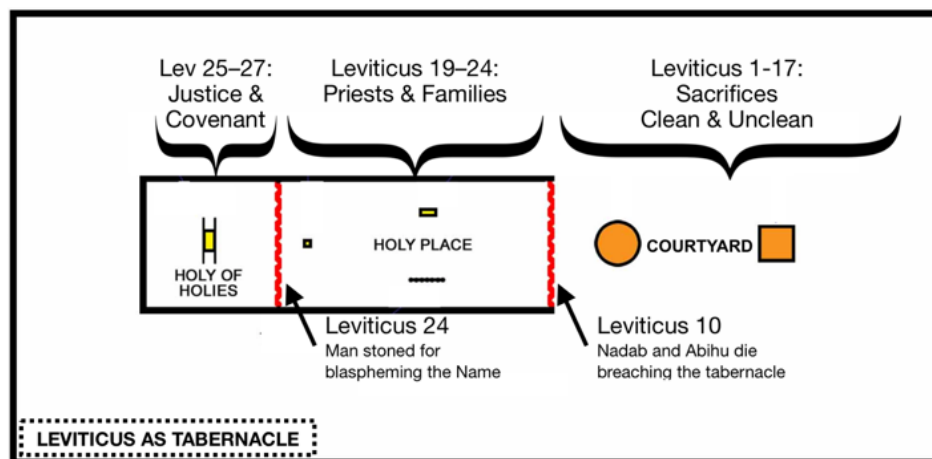
These three decreasing groupings of laws correspond directly to the three decreasing sizes of space in the tabernacle. The two narratives of death serve as the curtains or “screens” of the book that partition the laws into their increasingly “holy” settings. In the case of Leviticus 8-10,

³ Mary Douglas, *Jacob's Tears: The Priestly Work of Reconciliation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 127.

the [first screen](#), it presents two full chapters of wonder and ritual that allow God to come into the Holy Place where fire will then spew forth to light the miraculous flame of the altar. But chapter 10 shows the awful climax of the story, in the deaths of Nadab and Abihu, who literally go through the screen to enter the Holy Place (they also seem to go through the second screen to peak at God in the Most Holy Place). The rest of this story works out the effects of their actions and it serves as a warning for entering the Holy Place.

As for the second story, the [second screen](#), chapter 24 ends with the stoning of a blasphemer. But this is no ordinary stoning (is there such a thing?). Rather, the man is stoned because he blasphemes “the Name.” “[The Israelite woman’s son blasphemed the Name, and cursed](#)” ([Lev 24:11](#)). In the Scripture, “[Name](#)” is a title for the Angel of the LORD who presides over Israel from his throne seat, which is on top of the ark of the covenant. The ark goes in the Most Holy Place. Thus, this second story acts as a screen to warn us about entering anything that comes near the Most Holy things of God, especially as they deal with the LORD who sits enthroned—the Lord Jesus Christ.

Diagrams: Leviticus Parallels the Tabernacle in its Structure. From the works of Mary Douglas



Thus, our author writes, “The tabernacle has two screens which shut out unqualified persons from each of the two inner compartments. Two screens, two violent events, I am persuaded that this is the model of the tabernacle and of the literary pattern of the book.” In this way, with our minds now fully engaged in the context of a book that is often so difficult to make it through from beginning to end, our thoughts are reinforced with a profound theology of the sanctuary, which the book is already about, by its very structure. The architecture of the book literally takes you into the Most Holy Place, with warnings as you go.

But you must not forget the heart in this. If the book is really organized in such a way, then this makes Leviticus a kind of living, breathing tabernacle of the Word of God.

And if the tabernacle is a microcosm of God's invisible heavenly sanctuary, then this structure reinforces that its laws teach you how our world works. In an age of relativism, this is so very important. Since Christ spoke these words and gave you this illustration in the very pattern of the book, should not your heart be warmed with that precious news that he is speaking, yet also warned by the "screen" that to move closer is to move into a dangerous place—for this is where we find the All-Consuming Fire? Out of such sober joy, it ought to make you think of meeting together as God's people or living out your daily life to his glory and honor as you take his name upon yourself as Christians.

Laws in Sanctuaries

This way of looking at the book, and particularly at our story, is reinforced by the second feature of ancient writing. This has to do with memorization, which was used by nearly all people, as they did not have access to books as we do today. Of the many techniques used to help in memory is something we might call spatial architecture memorization. According to what we know, this technique was discovered

by the Greeks when the poet **Simonides of Ceos** (556-468 BC) had departed a banquet hall just before the roof collapsed, killing all who were in it. They asked Simonides who was killed, and he was able to recollect each of the guests by recalling the location each person sat around the table.⁴

Years ago, I actually attempted a modern take on this old technique when I purchased a **memory program** to figure out how guys can instantly memorize 200 names of people they had only just met. One of the techniques used was to visualize a room that you are very familiar with and then pick out 10 pieces of unique furniture or other items in the real room in a circular pattern. These will never move in your memory. Each piece receives a number (1, 2, 3 ... 10). Once you have this committed to instant memory, you are ready to begin.

Let's say you meet 2 new people and you want to remember their names. The name of the first person is **Douglas**. So, you create some kind immediate visual picture of Douglas doing something that sounds like the name, say **digging**. You then peg that to your first piece of furniture. Let's say it is a couch. So, the image might be of this man

⁴ Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature*, has a discussion and footnotes on p. 196.

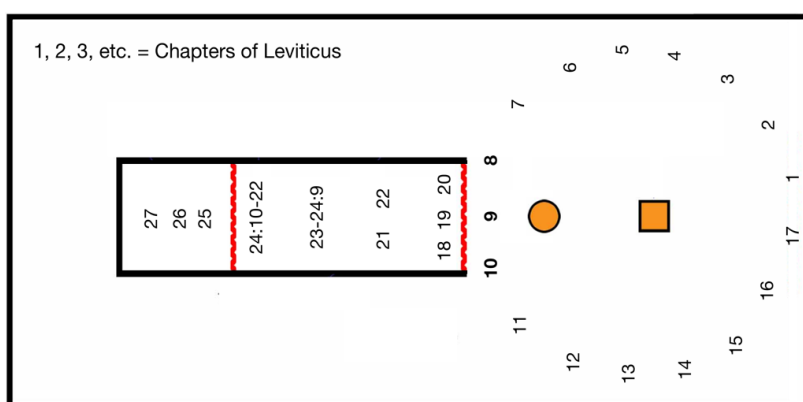
digging up a couch. The more bizarre you make it, the more memorable. Now you can remember his name by thinking of your couch and the image that comes to mind. A second name might be **Mary**. You think of a visual that reminds you of her name. Let's say she is getting **married**. Now peg it to your next piece of furniture. Let's say it is a TV. So you imagine this person getting married on TV. With practice, it becomes easier and easier.

The idea for the structure of Leviticus I'm giving you comes from Mary Douglas (see what I did there?). As it regards memory, the idea seems to revolve around the nearly impossible to imagine task of **committing to memory all of the tedious laws** found in the book. Again, almost the entire book is law. This is broken up only by two stories. Those stories serve to break the laws into decreasing segments which correspond to the sizes of the holy space in the tabernacle.

The first and largest collection deals with **sacrifices and clean and unclean** things. The courtyard is the only proper location for talking about these things. And, in fact, all of the events enumerated in this section take place in the courtyard. The second section deals with **priests and families**. Priests are the only ones allowed to go beyond the

curtain into the Holy Place, and they would often act on behalf of families as they did their work. Finally, **justice and covenant** round out the laws of Leviticus, and what better place to put these than in the corresponding Most Holy Place where we find the ark of the covenant inside of which is contained the Ten Words, the Ten Commandments?⁵

But you may have noticed a problem with our story. The Nadab and Abihu story is **not found at the end of the first series**. Instead, it comes in the middle (chs 8-10 out of 1-17). Can we make sense of this? Yes. If you were to visualize the area in front of the curtain in the courtyard with a circle, then you could divide that circle into seventeen equal portions, to account for the seventeen chapters of laws.⁶ It “just so happens” that chs. 8-10 put you smack dab in front of the curtain to the Holy Place.



⁵ See **Mary Douglas**, *Jacob's Tears*, 127.

⁶ This may be a little arbitrary, since they did not have chapter divisions. However, it seems to me that the placement of the Nadab and Abihu story with what are the more natural divisions of these chapters will amount to the same thing, even if you have more or less than 17.

With this structure and purpose, you can see that your **mind** is not to be numbingly glazing over the things you are reading in this book. Rather, it is to be actively engaged in putting order and reason and purpose to these laws—the order and purpose God gave them! They mean something. This structure that emulates the very building they all take place in helps you put tangible meaning to them. What these laws mean correspond to the holy things of God. God is the God of law and order and justice and he has provided the means by which he is to be approached.

Understanding that the laws actually have corresponding placement in the sanctuary where he resides, ought to then **warm your heart** to the fact that these are not arbitrary mindless commands given just to see what people would do. Rather, they are things that reflect the eternal holiness of the Triune God who resides in an eternal heavenly sanctuary of law and order and justice and goodness, and that when we violate his space or his order, he has provided means by which we might be forgiven and set apart as holy ourselves. Hopefully, this can more easily help you want to obey his law, even if many of the laws in Leviticus have been fulfilled by Jesus Christ.

Priests in Sanctuaries: I will be sanctified

Having looked now at how our story fits a larger structure through both screens and laws that belong in the sanctuary, I want to turn your attention to a third thing that belongs here. This is **God's priests and what happens to them**. To get at this, I'm going to first compare our story to two earlier stories in Exodus, for it seems very much that chs. 8-10 are deliberately paralleling them.

First, **a brief outline** to get our bearings. Leviticus 10 can be divided into three main sections:

1. Nadab and Abihu and Their Strange Fire (1-7)
2. The Vital Role of the Priesthood (8-11)
3. The Proper Eating of the Offerings (12-20)⁷

You can see that this is about the priesthood and how offerings **must be given** to God. Remember that the first priesthood began its ordination ceremony in **8:1**, which is now **eight days after** where we pick up the story in **10:1**.

First, I want to call to your attention to the last two verses of ch. 8. “**At the entrance of the tent of meeting you**

⁷ This is the outline in **Mark F. Rooker**, *Leviticus*, vol. 3A, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000).

shall remain day and night for seven days, performing what the LORD has charged, so that you do not die, for so I have been commanded. *And Aaron and his sons did all the things that the LORD commanded by Moses*” (Lev 8:35-36). Here we see that for the first seven days of the ordination ritual, Nadab and Abihu did everything exactly as they were supposed to.

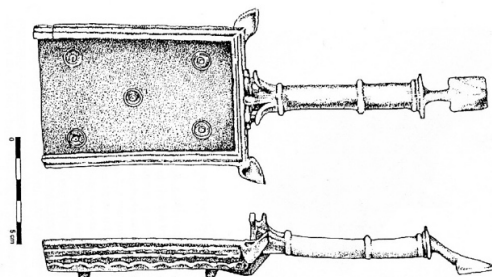
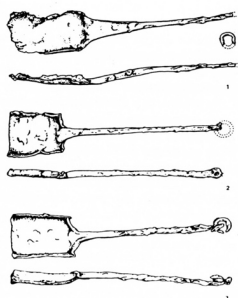
The first time we see them doing anything is in the very important story in Exodus 24. This is the first of our two stories. Here, the LORD invites Moses, Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel to come and worship him on Mt. Sinai. It specifically names only Nadab and Abihu among Aaron’s sons, and it tells them “Come up to the LORD” (Ex 24:1). When Moses had taken them to the appointed spot (24:9), “They saw the God of Israel” (10). And it concludes, very importantly, “And he did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; they beheld God, and ate and drank” (11). This banquet with Christ, full of food and wine, in the very presence of the Almighty, beholding the LORD, was a privilege very few have ever experienced in this life. Nadab and Abihu were two of them.

Now let’s return to Leviticus 10:1-2. “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” (10:1). The beginning of the verse is fine and resembles Exodus 24:1 in that they were indeed invited by God to come into the Holy Place to offer fire. This is what the laws of the first seven chapters taught us.

But then something goes awry. Actually, several things seem to go awry. They take their censers, which is not the problem,⁸ and they offer “unauthorized fire ... which he had not commanded them.” Though we’ve looked at this extensively, one puritan summarizes this important point one last time for us. “Had God ever forbidden it? Where do we find that God had ever forbidden them to offer strange

⁸ A censor, better translated as a pan, since the modern conception of a censor with a cup-like closing hanging on a chain is a Byzantine innovation. “Pan” fits the idea much better than what they had was some kind of flat pan with a handle.



Fire pans from the Temple of Dan, After Biran 1992:165. Courtesy of David Ilan, Nelson Glueck School

Metal fire pan from Bethsaida, after Freund 1999: 34, Fig. 22a. Courtesy of Rami Arav

Firepan f.1 from the ‘King’s Bible’ Spain, 1384. British Library

Figures and discussion in Raz Kletter, “Fire Pans in the Bible and Archaeology,” *The Torah*, n.d., <https://www.thetorah.com/article/fire-pans-in-the-bible-and-archaeology>

fire or appointed that they should offer only one kind of fire? There is no text of Scripture that you can find from the beginning of Genesis to this place where God had said in so many words expressly, ‘You shall offer no fire but one kind of fire.’”⁹ And so, the fire was a problem precisely because **it did not have its origin** and source **in God** who gave the fire in the previous verse and showed himself to all the people in his Glory. Their fire was thus a profane fire, and ordinary fire of their own kindling. And this was a huge problem. For what they did was to profane the Holy Place itself.

⁹ **Jeremiah Burroughs**, *Gospel Worship*, ed. Don Kistler (Ligonier, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1990), 3. Here are some others along the same line:

Thomas Watson. “The Lord hath always given testimonies of his displeasure against such as have corrupted his worship; Nadab and Abihu ‘offered strange fire,’ (other than God had sanctified) ‘upon the altar;’ ‘And fire went out from the Lord, and devoured them,’ Lev. 10:1. Whatsoever is not of God’s own appointment in his worship, that he looks upon as strange fire; and no wonder he is so highly incensed at it, for as if God were not wise enough to appoint the manner how he will be served; men will go to prescribe to him, and as if the rules for his worship were defective, they will attempt to mend the copy, and superadd their inventions.” **Thomas Watson**, “The Godly Man’s Picture Drawn with a Scripture-Pencil,” in *Discourses on Important and Interesting Subjects, Being the Select Works of the Rev. Thomas Watson*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh; Glasgow: Blackie, Fullarton, & Co.; A. Fullarton & Co., 1829), 408.

Thomas Goodwin. “2. When they offered incense or sacrifice acceptable to God, they were not to offer it with common fire, which is ordinary in the world in their chimneys and kitchens, which was kindled by themselves by sparks out of stones, or from things here below; but it was to be fire from heaven, and taken from the altar, (so Lev. 9:24,) which was kept continually burning, and therefore when a new altar was made, ‘fire came from heaven, 2 Chron. 7:3; and the high priest was to take fire off the altar, whenever he offered incense, Lev. 16:12. And therefore when Nadab and Abihu offered ‘common fire of their own kindling,’ Lev. 10:1, they were consumed for thinking to please God with it. Now all these things fell out in types to them.” **Thomas Goodwin**, *The Works of Thomas Goodwin*, vol. 3 (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1861), 346.

But something else seems to be amiss. It says they did this “before the LORD.” In the previous verse this same phrase is used, and it seems to mean the Most Holy Place, where Yahweh was supposed to be shielded by a screen. If there is anything deliberate in the way this story is told in relation to Exodus 24, this is in parallel to “they saw the God of Israel.” Perhaps they thought, if we saw him once, he shouldn’t mind if we do so again. That’s all part of their will-worship we looked at last time.

Then comes the kicker. Whereas before God did not lay his hand on anyone who went up the mountain and beheld God, now fire comes out from before the LORD and consumes them and they die. Those boys who were obedient and faithful on the mountain, during the ordination ceremony, and as we will see in a moment, at the Golden Calf story, fell short now. God’s priests sinned grievously. And they paid the great final penalty for their presumption.

Exodus 24	Leviticus 10:1-2
24:1 “Come up to the LORD”	10:1 Each took his censer ... and offered unauthorized fire before the LORD
24:9 “They saw the God of Israel”	31–33 Aaron and his sons are told to eat their portion at the door of the tent, enjoined to stay there seven days
24:11 “[God] did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; they beheld God, and ate and drank.	10:2 Fire came out from before the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD.

As far as our hearts and minds go now, this should obviously put you in a state of **contemplation** and, at this point in the story at least, perhaps even anxiety. But more than that, what it does is shows that at the first possible moment, like Adam before them, when time comes to serve and to guard the sanctuary, they immediately **fall short**. This is **not good news** for anyone, given the state of sin and rebellion that we are all in which made the first seven chapters so necessary in this book.

This takes me to the **second story**—the **Golden Calf**. While not named by name, it is almost certain that **these two men also appear at the end of that debacle**. When Moses had come down from the mountain, he saw a terrible sight. The people had melted all their gold, created a giant golden calf, built an altar, **offered burnt offerings** and peace offerings, and sat down to **eat and drink** and rose up to play (**Ex 32:1-6**). God's anger burns against the people (**7-11**), but it is quenched by Moses' intercession (**12-14**).

To **restore order** (both social and ritual order), Moses melts the calf, grinds up the gold (**15-20**), scatters gold dust on the water, and **makes the people drink it** (**20**). In classic

eye-for-an-eye fashion,¹⁰ the punishment (drinking gold) fits the crime (drinking to the golden calf). Moses then reproaches Aaron, and the people lose control (21-25). Then Moses called out, “Who is on the LORD’s side? Come to me.” And all the sons of Levi gathered around him (26). This has to include Nadab and Abihu, who, along with their brothers, put to the sword some 3,000 men (27-28). And thus, in everything we see of them up to until Leviticus 10, Nadab and Abihu are zealous for the LORD, obedient to the extreme, and have been given great privileges by God. This makes their disobedience all the more spectacular and unexpected here in Leviticus 10.

But now let’s think about all of Leviticus 8-10 in relation to the Calf. Coming back to Leviticus 8-9, the ordination culminates in the last verse of Ch. 9. “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” (Lev 9:24). This verse, in fact, completes an exact literary *opposite* of the golden calf story.

¹⁰ Gregory Nazianzen, *Oration* 2.93. “I hear again that Nadab and Abihu, for having merely offered incense with strange fire, were with strange fire destroyed, the instrument of their impiety being used for their punishment, and their destruction following at the very time and place of their sacrilege; and not even their father Aaron, who was next to Moses in the favor of God, could save them.”

For in Leviticus 8-9, the **burnt and peace offerings** are offered properly, exactly as commanded; God is not angry at the people but allows them all to **see the glory** of the LORD and **sends fire from Himself** to the consume the offering.

Exodus	Leviticus
32:1–5 Burnt offerings are sacrificed to the golden calf	8:1–30 Anointing of Aaron, first burnt offering in the court of the tent of meeting
6 The people sit down to eat and drink and rise up to dance	31–33 Aaron and his sons are told to eat their portion at the door of the tent, enjoined to stay there seven days
7–11 God's anger burns to consume the people	9:23 The congregation sees the glory of the Lord
12–14 God's burning anger is quenched by Moses' pleading	9:24 God sends his fire to consume the burnt offering ¹¹

This is critical to see, because the impression we are given in comparing that story to this, is that **things are finally getting better**. The entire nation sinned against God and he punished them. In doing so, he took his covenant with Levi which was promised earlier to Aaron and made good on the deal. The Levities will serve as the intercessors. *Obviously*, they will do a much better job, because they have shown themselves true in following the LORD's command to purge the evil among the congregation.

¹¹ Chart in **Mary Douglas**, *Leviticus as Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 203.

Then **the two verses** we just looked at are interjected into the narrative. The unthinkable happens. God kills the first two priests of Israel (minus Aaron himself). In the blink of an eye, we are **right back to sins like the Golden Calf** (last time you may recall I said it is possible that their names in fact echo that story: “Voluntary” and “He is my father”) and all the trouble it caused everyone. This is the one great truth of the OT narrative. Just when you think a **hero** finally comes along who will set things right, perhaps even be that “seed” of Eve who would crush the head of the serpent, it all goes to hell, literally. Fire comes out and consumes them.

The reason all of this happens is stated in **vs. 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. ’’**” (This is actually stated poetically.)¹²

Among those who are near me
I will be sanctified
And before all the people
I will be glorified

¹² What does this oracle at the first part of the verse mean? **Liane Marquis Feldman**, “Ritual Sequence and Narrative Constraints in Leviticus 9:1-10:3,” *JHS* 17:2 (2017): 1-35, https://www.academia.edu/35559212/Ritual_Sequence_and_Narrative_Constraints_in_Leviticus_9_1-10_3. Also, this seems to be a poetic oracle in the classic “drink and doom” narrative that is quite common in ancient literature, including the Bible (Daniel 5 for example). See Mary Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature*, 204.

It is at this point in this verse that the Puritan I quoted above spends an entire book on the subject. **Jeremiah Burroughs** (1599 – 1646) wrote *Gospel Worship*. **Sproul** once said of this book, “[It] has greatly influenced my understanding of biblical worship. It is one of the most important books I have ever read.” **Tim Challies** explains, “Only a Puritan could write a full book, 300 pages, expositing a single verse of Scripture, or more accurately, a *portion* of a single verse of Scripture. And only a Puritan could do it successfully. In *Gospel Worship* Jeremiah Burroughs does just that.”¹³ The book is **14 sermons on Leviticus 10:3’s**, “*I will be sanctified in them that come nigh to me.*” (I wanted you to be aware of it for your edification if you so choose to buy and read it.) What is the meaning of him being sanctified? John Piper puts it succinctly. “The priests must treat God as holy in their sacrifices, and the result will be that God will be manifested as holy to the people—that is, he will be glorified.”¹⁴ But, I’ll add, even if they do not, he will still manifest his holiness.

¹³ **Tim Challies**, “Gospel Worship,” *Challies* (June 5, 2006), <https://www.challies.com/book-reviews/gospel-worship/>.

¹⁴ **John Piper**, *What Jesus Demands from the World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2006), 351 n. 1.

The verse ends with [the opposite response of shouting](#). “... [And Aaron held his peace](#).” Aaron held his peace! Obviously, he was angry. But [what is he going to say?](#) God is real, he can’t pretend he isn’t. He saw what just happened. God is powerful. He can’t fake his mind out of that one either. His two sons are dead. God is holy, this didn’t come about by accident or vindictiveness. The Holy One is simply not like Aaron or his sons or you or I. The Name will be sanctified among his people.¹⁵

¹⁵ **Going Deeper.** We do not have time today, but it is worth noting that several have tied this to [the Lord’s Prayer](#).

[Jonathan Edwards](#). “Its first petition is, [Hallowed be thy name](#), which in Scripture language is the same with *glorified* be thy name; as is manifest from Leviticus 10:3 [“The LORD spake, saying, I will be *sanctified* (=hallowed) in them that come nigh me, and before all the people I will be *glorified*”], Ezekiel 28:22 and many other places.” [John Piper and Jonathan Edwards](#), *God’s Passion for His Glory: Living the Vision of Jonathan Edwards* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1998), 198.

[Richard Baxter](#). “It is a taking of [God’s name in vain](#), who is a jealous God, and will be sanctified of all that draw near unto him (see Commandment ii, iii, Lev. 10:2, 3).” [Richard Baxter](#) and William Orme, *The Practical Works of the Rev. Richard Baxter*, vol. 4 (London: James Duncan, 1830), 324.

[Wilhelmus à Brakel](#). “Therefore, you who desecrate the [Lord’s Name](#) and do not glorify the Lord, give heed! The purpose for which you were created and the reason that the Lord has bestowed so many temporal and spiritual blessings upon you is to glorify God. Even though this may not appear to be a sin to you, and you lightly step over it, it is nevertheless a fierce evil and makes you subject to the dreadful wrath of God. Pay careful attention to what I shall briefly say to you, and may it cause you to repent. ... God will glorify Himself in you by manifesting His righteousness and by punishing you in an extraordinary manner. What a dreadful condition it is to be the object of God’s wrath! It will be such that men and angels will see it and with approval will acquiesce therein, saying, “Even so, Lord God Almighty, true and righteous are Thy judgments” (Rev. 16:7). When *Nadab and Abihu* did not glorify God, God consumed them with fire from heaven, and it is stated in addition to this, “I will be sanctified in them that come nigh Me, and before all the people I will be glorified” (Lev. 10:3).” [Wilhelmus à Brakel](#), *The Christian’s Reasonable Service*, ed. Joel R. Beeke, trans. Bartel Elshout, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 1994), 253–254.

So, as angry as he must have been, he said nothing. This is wisdom itself.

Many have used this part of the story over the centuries as an opportunity to preach against **murmuring**. **Richard Sibbes** is a fine example as he tells us that murmuring, that is complaining under your breath about something God has done, comes from **ignorance of God's particular providence** and from **self-love**. He says that the cures for this disease consist partly in meditation and partly in practice.

First, labor to have a right understanding and knowledge of God's justice without all exception. Secondly, that he is infinitely good, disposing all for the benefit and good of his own children. Thirdly, labor to know and observe his particular providence to the lower creatures. The hair falls not without his providence, and he regards the sparrows (Matt 10:29). These will make us practice right thoughts. First, we will justify God in whatsoever is done and decreed, as David said, "You are just, O Lord, and holy, and righteous are your judgments" (Ps 119:137) ... And Hezekiah, "the word of the Lord is good" (2Kgs 20:19). And Psalm 39:1, David held his tongue. The reason he renders, 'It is you, Lord, who are good, and you do all for good.' Therefore learn a holy silence as David leads us in Psalm 62:1, "My soul waits on God with silence" ...

Thus did Aaron: though his sons were destroyed, “yet he held his peace” (Lev 10:3). And when you find any discontented thoughts to arise in your heart, check yourself in the beginning, “So foolish and like a beast am I,” says David (Ps 73:22); and “why are you disquieted, O my soul? and why are you troubled within me” (Ps 42:5).¹⁶

While Moses leaves his brother to be (these are his own nephews keep in mind), he knows that something must be done quickly about what has happened. The first thing he does is **summon Mishael and Elzaphan**, the sons of Uzziel the uncle of Aaron (Lev 10:4). This puts them in the Levitical line, but they are not priests. These are the Levites who must tend to the day to day operations of the upkeep of the sanctuary. Their names mean “**Who is what God is**”

¹⁶ **Richard Sibbes**, *The Complete Works of Richard Sibbes*, ed. Alexander Balloch Grosart, vol. 5 (Edinburgh; London; Dublin: James Nichol; James Nisbet and Co.; W. Robertson, 1863), 20–22. Spelling and punctuation modernized. See also Basil. *Q. 29. Concerning one who performs his actions in an arrogant or critical spirit. A.* The work of a man who is given to murmuring or self-exaltation should certainly not be coupled with works done by the humble of heart and contrite of spirit. In general, the work of the former should have no value for the pious, ‘for that which is high to men is an abomination before God.’ There is also another precept of the Apostle which reads: ‘Neither do you murmur, as some of them murmured and were destroyed by the destroyer’; and again: ‘not with sadness or of necessity.’ The work of such persons, therefore, even as a blemished sacrifice, should not be accepted, and to include it with the work of the rest is unholy. If those bringing strange fire to the altar were the objects of such mighty wrath (Lev 10:1-2), how is it not perilous to accept with a view to observing the command work which proceeds from a spirit that is hateful to God?” **Basil of Caesarea**, *The Long Rules Q. 29 in Saint Basil: Ascetical Works*, ed. Roy Joseph Deferrari, trans. M. Monica Wagner, vol. 9, *The Fathers of the Church* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1962), 292.

(Mishael) and “God hides; i.e. defends him; whom God protects” (Elzaphan). I find both names pregnant with meaning. God is who God is, and he hides himself from the people in order to protect them from himself! These two men are a mercy.

What he commands them to do is carry your brothers (fellows Israelites and Levities) from the front of the sanctuary and out of the camp. Their bodies were in the courtyard, apparently, they got out just in time for everyone to see them engulfed in flame and fall dead. But now, the precinct is unholy, for nothing unclean (i.e. dead) can be there. So, like the dead offerings we have seen previously, they are to be taken away outside the camp and disposed.

Vs. 5 is a verse that is easy to pass by. “So they came near and carried them in their coats out of the camp, as Moses had said.” They didn’t even take the coats off of them. Can you imagine what was going through their minds? Will it happen to us too? Will we make it out of here alive? Obedience with a proper sense of fear is what such a story should make anyone do.

Moses is not finished. He now gives commands to Aaron and his two remaining sons, Eleazar and Ithamar (6). They are not to let the hair of their heads hang loose. Apparently,

they had longer hair. They were not to **tear their clothes**, lest they die, and wrath come upon all the congregation. Moses lets them know that this could very easily happen again.

This is a very specific command about **how they are to respond to *this* event**. These two actions were done as acts of mourning when someone had died. Moses is telling them they are not to mourn! He doesn't forbid all mourning. "**Let your brothers, the whole house of Israel, bewail the burning that the LORD has kindled**" (6). So it isn't like Moses is some kind of sociopath.

They were not to mourn **because their work was not yet finished**. "**Do not go outside the entrance of the tent of meeting, lest you die, for the anointing oil of the LORD is upon you**" (7). You see? **The ceremony is not yet complete**.¹⁷ If the fire of God is holy, so also is the oil. Holiness will not stand still for profanity. It will win out. The only question is how. His brother and nephews chose life. "**And they did according to the word of Moses.**" In all of this, Moses has done exactly what he did at the Calf

¹⁷ This reminds me somewhat of the story of Jesus and his disciples and fasting. "**Then the disciples of John came to him, saying, 'Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?' And Jesus said to them, 'Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast'**" (Matt 9:14-15).

incident. He has **restored order**. It is quite parallel in the way that story is told.

Moses then gives a rather **strange command** (8-9). “**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**” (9). Many people have, with good reason, seen this as a probable added offense of Nadab and Abihu. Perhaps in the celebratory atmosphere of the ordination, they had **gotten drunk** and it clouded their judgment. This may even be hinted at in the next verse, “**You are to distinguish between the holy and the common, and between the unclean and the clean**” (10). This was precisely what they did not do with the fire, and so they were destroyed. (It also is a foreshadowing of the next chapter).

But you can also read this against the two Exodus stories. Recall that they drank wine on Sinai when they saw God. Why not do it again? In the calf story, all the people drank to the calf. But finally, whereas Moses made the people drink the gold from their idol, here he forbids drinking. And so this may be put here to cause the mind of someone familiar with that story to see the slight but noticeable difference. This is **the first sign that what Nadab and Abihu**

did may not end it total disaster. Moses commanded them “to teach the people of Israel all the statutes that the LORD has spoken to them by Moses” (11), and they will in fact begin to do this. Which can only mean that they are not all going to die here. But I’m getting ahead of myself.

Because, next we find Moses speaking again to the three. He tells them to “take the grain offering that is left of the LORD’s food offerings, and eat it unleavened beside the altar, for it is most holy” (12). They are to eat it in a holy place, because it is their due as priests (13). They are to follow the rule of the food offering concerning the waved and the eating of the rest (14-15).

Then we immediately get the impression that even Moses is a bit nervous as to what is still happening. For it says he diligently inquired about the goat of the sin offering, and it had in fact been burnt up. But he was angry with Eleazar and Ithamar (16). The reason was because they, too, had been negligent, like their brothers. They had not eaten the sin offering yet in the sanctuary. But it is a thing “most holy” and was given that they may bear the iniquity of the congregation and to make atonement for them before the

LORD (17). Hosea calls it “eating up the sin of my people” (Hos 4:8).¹⁸ If they do not do this, all is lost.¹⁹

Moses said, “Behold, its blood was not brought into the inner part of the sanctuary. You certainly ought to have eaten it in the sanctuary, as I commanded” (18). Given what has just happened, Moses thinks this oversight could prove fatal to them too, and the entire priesthood would be dead before it even got off the ground. The sin cannot be atoned until the food is gone. And in this way, it is not merely the older brothers that we should think about. But also the younger. Thus, there is yet another parallel to the Golden Calf. For in both stories, Moses reproves Aaron.

As you think about the connection Leviticus 8-10 has with the two stories from Exodus, at this point, your mind must be thinking that though they began well, they are not ending up any better than the Golden Calf story. This is the law in all of its deadly glory. For it is condemning men

¹⁸ Jeremiah Burroughs, “An Exposition of the Prophecy of Hosea,” in *An Exposition of the Prophecy of Hosea*, ed. James Sherman (Edinburgh; London: James Nichol; James Nisbet & Co., 1863), 228.

¹⁹ Cyril shows how this foreshadows the work of Christ. “Do you see how those assisting at the holy altar and appeasing wrath for sinners with pure prayers act as mediators by eating the sin offerings, as it were, offering to God their own souls as a sweet-smelling odor for the sins of the people?” Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on the Twelve Prophets*, ed. Thomas P. Halton, trans. Robert C. Hill, vol. 115, *The Fathers of the Church* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2007), 110.

Exodus	Leviticus
32: 15–20 Moses restoring order, burns the calf, grinds up the gold	10: 3 Moses restoring order, arranges for the bodies to be removed. Aaron and remaining sons to stay in the tent of meeting, ‘lest you die’ (10: 7)
Scatters gold dust on the water, makes the people drink it	9 ‘Drink no strong drink’
21 Moses reproaches Aaron, people are out of control, fighting ensues, Levites kill 3,000	16–19 Moses reproaches Aaron
35 God sends plague	??? ²⁰
	20 Moses accepts Aaron's response

because of their own sin against God. Thus, your mind must let the law do its work on your own sinful [heart](#). For it is only in [seeing yourself](#) in the story, as someone no better than Nadab, Abihu, Eleazar, Ithamar, or Aaron that you can possibly ever come to the end of the story and have it work out the good news. Jesus came to call the sick, not the well. Do you see yourself as someone who is sinful and in need of forgiveness? And do you see how it is that even when God sends other sinful people to intercede on your behalf, this simply isn’t enough to stand before a holy God? This are the questions the entire narrative is forcing us to ask.

²⁰ Chart in [Mary Douglas](#), *Leviticus as Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 203.

The Priest in The Sanctuary

Then we come to the last two verses. For **the first time, Aaron speaks**. In the Golden Calf story, you may recall that when Aaron spoke it was with the absurd words that he didn't create the calf, rather, he just put the gold into the fire and the calf came out fully formed. He was a man full of shame and guilt for breaking God's law and at that point, he was only making lame excuses.

Now he speaks again. But the parallel shows a change. “Aaron said to Moses, ‘Behold, today they have offered their sin offering and their burnt offering before the LORD, and yet such things as these have happened to me! If I had eaten the sin offering today, would the LORD have approved’” (**Lev 10:19**). It seems that that high priest of Israel is seeing things more clearly than Moses. The idea might be two-fold. First, the offering was made at the altar in the courtyard. However, because Nadab and Abihu died there in the courtyard (it would matter even if they died in the holy place), their corpses contaminated the sacrifice, making it

unclean. The offering absorbed their impurities. How could they then be eaten?²¹

Second, it seems to me that Aaron understood that he had to have his heart right, and it is difficult for me to think that he did after what had happened to him. Under either or both reasons, Aaron is foreshadowing both the wisdom of the High Priest to come and the necessity that he must come. There is massive failure throughout the system of the priesthood. Even Moses is not off the hook, for he has failed to understand just how deeply this sin has penetrated the sanctuary. For his part, the story ends with Moses approving of Aaron's words, the opposite of his reaction when his brother explained the existence of the calf.

As we let this story now linger in our minds, you should leave with a couple of important thoughts. The first is the gospel. God was gracious to the priesthood,²² in spite of all that happened. But he was gracious to them *because* he knew

²¹ Jacob Milgrom, *A Continental Commentary: Leviticus: A Book of Ritual and Ethics* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2004), 100.

²² An interesting comment is made by Laughlin. "The fire that burns upon the altar can also be a 'devouring fire' kindled by Yahweh's anger." But when as sacrifice is properly offered, God accepts it in his grace (Lev 9:24). And in this way, the fire on the altar that came miraculously from God himself "represented Yahweh's constant presence within the temple in terms of grace and/or wrath." He explains how the word *yaqad* (translated as "burning" in the ESV of Lev 6:2, 5, 6) can also mean "kindling." It appears only a handful of times in the OT, and in several of those a fire which burns is often kindled in God's anger (Dt 32:22; Jer 15:14; 17:4) or is a devouring fire (Isa 33:14; 10:17; Dt 32:22). See John C. H. Laughlin, "The 'Strange Fire' of Nadab and Abihu," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 95:4 (Dec 1976): 562 and n. 13.

that a greater High Priest would come from the line of Melchizedek, **thereby allowing Aaron and his sons to be forgiven**. He knew, as Hebrews tells us, that **perfection was not attainable through the Levitical priesthood (Heb 7:11)**. But in the greater Priesthood, it was, and thereby, through his perfect acts as High Priest, Jesus changed these laws by fulfilling them in his person, so that you no longer need to go through these kinds of ordeals, but may simply turn to Jesus Christ to intercede for you to the Father that his wrath might be averted against you.

But you should also be struck with something else. Wenham closes his commentary on this chapter with the following words. **“But the most striking principle endorsed by the NT is that the closer a man is to God the stricter the standard he will be judged by (v. 3). Our Lord said: “Everyone to whom much is given, of him will much be required” (Luke 12:48). Peter: “Judgment begins with the household of God” (1 Pet. 4:17). James (3:1): “We who teach shall be judged with greater strictness.” The story of Nadab and Abihu vividly illustrates these NT sayings.”**²³

²³ **Gordon J. Wenham**, *The Book of Leviticus*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979), 160. **John Flavel** makes a point that is relevant here. **“No acts of ours can be good and acceptable to the Lord, further than it is agreeable to his will revealed in the word ... uncommanded acts of worship are abominable to God, and highly dangerous to ourselves; they kindle the fire of his jealousy, to**

George Swinnock warned,

Friend, do not say it is but one sin, and I may be bold with it; but rather, it is sin, and so mortal, and I may not allow it. As Christ gave himself to redeem you from all iniquity (Titus 2:14), so also give yourself to him in all manner of duty. How severely have some been punished for one sin! ... (Lev 10:1, 2). If the righteous be recompensed on the earth, much more the transgressor and the sinner.²⁴

Therefore, [approach the table](#) today only if you are in Christ. Do so soberly, knowing that you are his priests in the new covenant and that much is required of you. But do so happily, knowing that Jesus has forgiven your sins once-for-all, and has taken the wrath of God that they deserve upon himself, so that you might have eternal life.

the ruin and destruction of the presumptuous sinner, Lev. 10:1, 2. So that if the beauty and excellency of the will of God be not enough to allure us, the danger of acting without the knowledge of it, may justly terrify us.” [John Flavel](#), *The Whole Works of the Reverend John Flavel*, vol. 3 (London; Edinburgh; Dublin: W. Baynes and Son; Waugh and Innes; M. Keene, 1820), 452–453.

²⁴ [George Swinnock](#), *The Works of George Swinnock, M.A.*, vol. 5 (Edinburgh; London; Dublin: James Nichol; James Nisbet and Co.; G. Herbert, 1868), 454.

Appendix: Isaac Watts Q & A

CHAP. V.—*Of the ceremonial Law of the Jews* 72. Q. With what fire were the sacrifices burned? A. With fire which came down at first from heaven on the altar, and it was kept always burning on the altar, for sacred uses, that is, to light the lamps, to burn incense, and to kindle other fires in their worship; Lev. 9:24. and 6:13.

73. Q. Who were those persons that dared to use other fire in worship than what God appointed? A. Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, burned incense with strange fire; Lev. 10:1, 2.

74. Q. What was their punishment? A. There went out a fire from the Lord, and devoured them; Lev. 10:1, 2.²⁵

²⁵ Isaac Watts, *The Works of the Rev. Isaac Watts*, vol. 5 (London; Leeds: William Baynes; Thomas Williams and Son; Thomas Hamilton; Josiah Conder; Edward Baines, 1813), 409.

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